

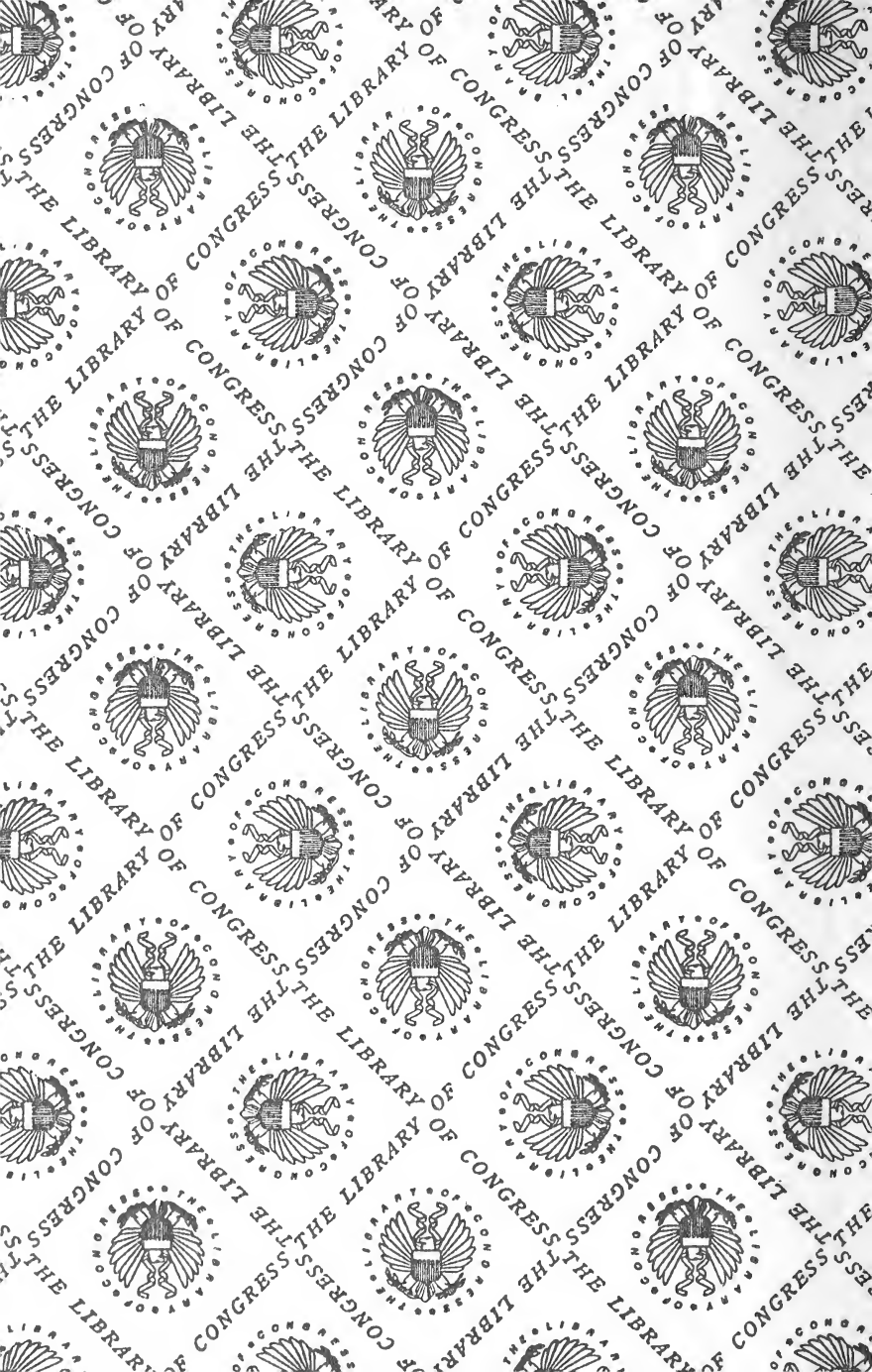
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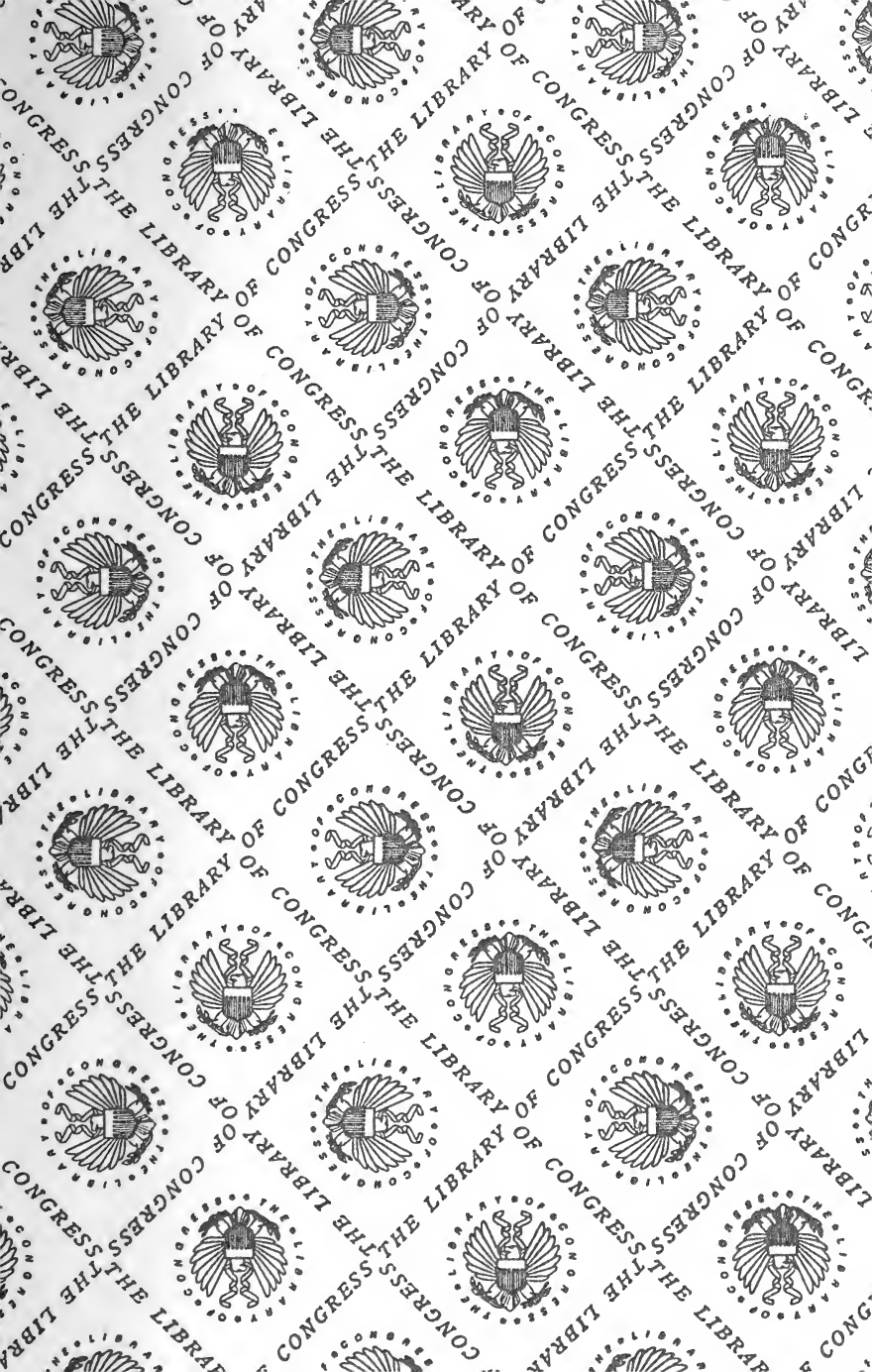
1922

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MYRRHA: A TRAGEDY







MYRRHA

MYRRHA:

A Tragedy In Five Acts

BY

CHARLES V. H. ROBERTS

AUTHOR OF

"The Great Conspiracy," "The Call of Sorrow," etc.

ILLUSTRATED BY BLANCHE BRINK



BOSTON

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TO MY SISTER

MAR 30 1922

MYRRHA: A TRAGEDY

BRITANNICUS

To make you, sweet, my wife.

MYRRHA

Nay, nay, my lord.

BRITANNICUS

For some days past, I've thought of telling you:
It can be and it shall. You smile? Why, dear?

MYRRHA

Britannicus, just let us be good friends.

BRITANNICUS

Is that your choice?

MYRRHA

Yes, why should I deny?

BRITANNICUS

Sweet love!

MYRRHA

Pray do not say such things to me!

BRITANNICUS

What reason, what prevents my speaking out?

MYRRHA

Alas, ah whither, whither shall I fly?

BRITANNICUS

I give you love—you are too young to know.

MYRRHA

Rome makes me fearful: I am all alone.

BRITANNICUS

Though Rome is cruel, maidens can be kind;
Oft love creeps into kindness like a prayer.

MYRRHA

No, no, Britannicus, no! no!

BRITANNICUS

Dear girl—!

MYRRHA

Be kind and have me for your lasting friend.

BRITANNICUS

So be it; till I teach you, dear, to love.

MYRRHA

Say not so much—we've been here now too long.

BRITANNICUS

I cannot say too much when so much love
Makes loving thoughts to utter loving words.

[Enter XENOPHON]

Ah! Why intrudes the Court physician here?
To show strange tricks?

XENOPHON

My age doth treble yours.

BRITANNICUS

Stand you confessed of such senility?

XENOPHON

I am content; fair fortune is our friend.

BRITANNICUS (*impatiently*)I ask what brings this sudden entrance, sir?
What is the worst?

XENOPHON

Your pardon, noble prince,—
Your father had an illness slight.

BRITANNICUS

That's strange.

The slightest ills are those we'd best mistrust.

XENOPHON

Not always, sir.

MYRRHA

One knows not what may chance.

XENOPHON

I came to give the Empress my report.

BRITANNICUS

It was suspected and I do believe—

Ah well, pray tell me what is your report.

XENOPHON

All's well, and Claudius is recovering.

[To himself]

Death never yet has dulled the subtle charm,—

The witchcraft hid in this profession;

My art is to postpone the funeral day

Yet overlook the murder 'neath mine eyes.

*[Exit through the door to the adjoining apartment,
closing it behind him.]*

BRITANNICUS

Deceit is vain: he cannot hide his thoughts,—

I'm sure it's not the truth that doctor speaks;

But I shall wait until my step-dame comes

And learn the facts; that is if truth be had

Amid the chaos of intrigues hatched here

Upon the Palatine.

MYRRHA

I pity you.

BRITANNICUS

We cannot use too much precaution here;

In truth I cannot Agrippina trust.

MYRRHA

Let us not worry, only do our part.

BRITANNICUS

Your part I have just asked of you.

MYRRHA

Nay, nay,—

Then falls all hope I built on friendship's base.

BRITANNICUS

Fall too the plans I happily had framed,—

O that I'd find my death in glorious war.

MYRRHA (*sadly*)

Yon know not, sure, the pains of war, dear lord,
Which have reduced me to this slavery;

To see the glory of a life despoiled

As mine of wealth and ease, sold, carried off,—

[*Dreamily*]

My home in Britain—I remember well

—That morn the legions came and ruthlessly

Did snatch me from my father's loving arms.

The noblest he, and chief most loved of all

Our noble tribe. I was his only child.

I was his pride, his strength, his company;

How oft he lifted me upon his knees,

And tenderly he stroked my wavy hair.

He loved me, O you could not understand!

My heart doth swell as it would burst and break.

Who could suspect the deadly snare? My sire

Was then imprisoned in the Mamertine,

Chained there midst vilest slaves in filth and gloom.

And there he died—the nearest to my heart,

The greatest of the great. Accursed Rome!

BRITANNICUS

Beloved one! I knew not of this crime.

MYRRHA

How base a doom for this most kingly man!
 A helpless captive reft of all he loved
 And lived for, in the very noon of life.
 O list! my father said before he died,
 "No hair of Myrrha's head shall e'er be harmed."
 Still now! I'm one of Agrippina's slaves.
 A slave to such as she—I had more hope.
 You speak of wedding me? You are the son
 Of Claudius, some day to rule as he
 In tyranny. Shall I a Roman wed?

BRITANNICUS

For love's sake, hear me.

MYRRHA

'Tis impossible!

Howe'er it wound my feelings, sir, I still
 Would be your friend. I'm not of lowly rank.

BRITANNICUS

You bring as many thoughts as night wears stars.
 If you would Rome redeem, but be her queen.

MYRRHA

Though I am honored, sir, still we must part;
 The crown of Rome does not concern my heart.
 There's something, Oh, much higher in my
 thoughts.

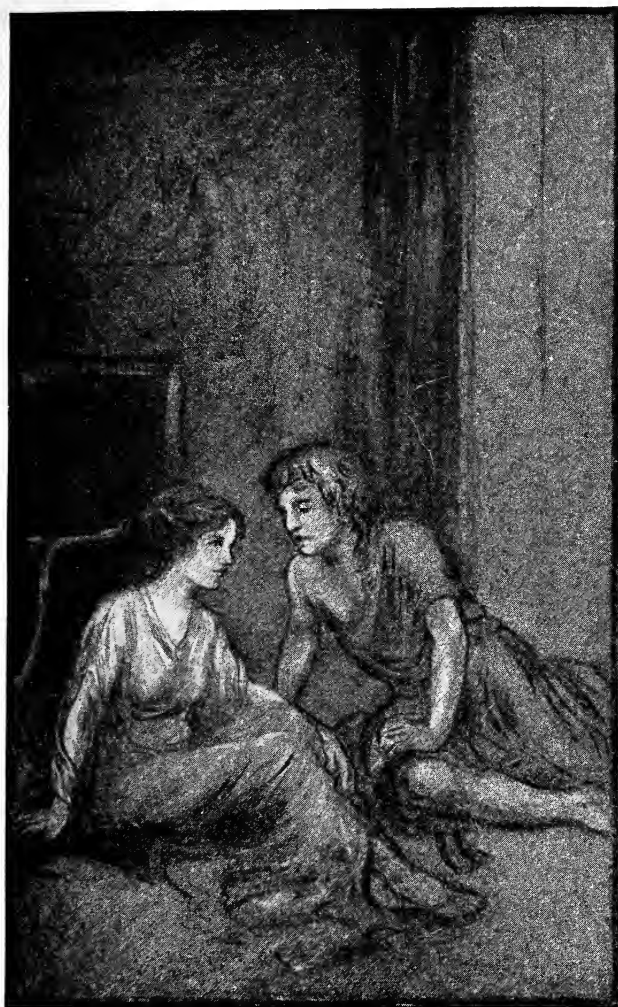
BRITANNICUS

What do you mean? What cryptic words are
 these?

Your voice in strangeness makes Love musical.

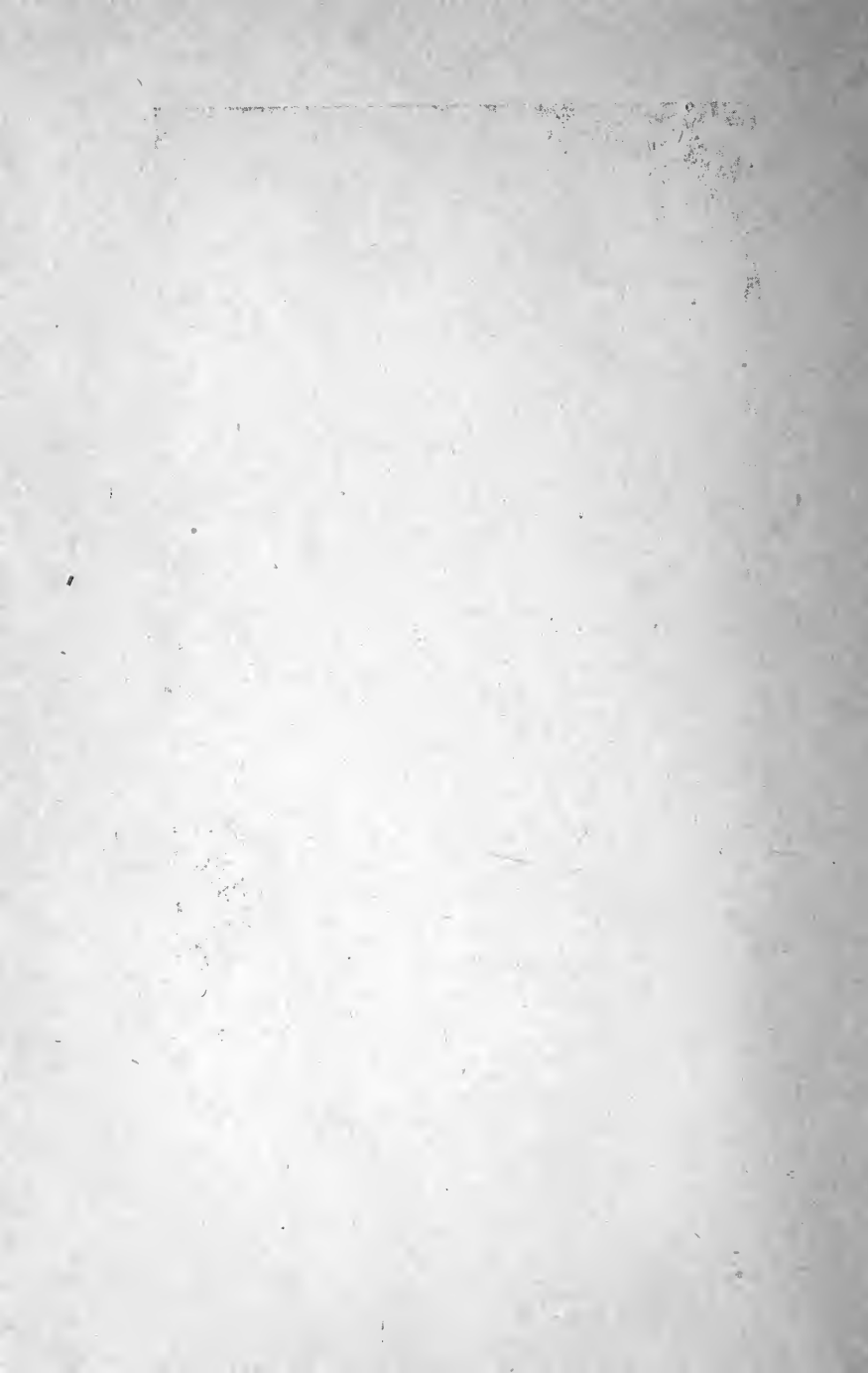
MYRRHA

Be kinder pray.



"You bring as many thoughts as night wears stars.
If you would Rome redeem, but be her queen."

Act I. Scene 1.



BRITANNICUS

What more than this? O sweet!

MYRRHA

Would you attend a tale o'erheard by me
From one of the Augusta's maids—

BRITANNICUS

Tell it

To me.

MYRRHA

'Tis not of war, Britannicus,
But something that's above all mortal things;
Something the wise men ponder on. My lord,
It was impossible to doubt her words.

BRITANNICUS

Though I may doubt, still I would hear your tale.

MYRRHA

From her sad voice and sympathy intense,
She felt the story keenly she unrolled.
'Twas of a Hebrew come from Nazareth,
A Carpenter by trade. He was adored
By many of the Jews and called by some
Selected few their God.

BRITANNICUS

Your talk is strange.

MYRRHA

List! "This was twenty years ago," she said;
"His name was Christus"—as she spoke His name,
The tear drops glistening filled her beauteous eyes
And flowed unchecked: her sighing soul appeared
Consumed in love, in prayer of fervency
And tender gratitude to Him; in Faith

Consistent and unwavering and sure
 As granite hills. Her face grew then as soft
 As meadows sleeping in the moonlit vales
 Or seas a-dream in night's omnipotence.
 She told me many wondrous legends grown
 Familiar in the hills of Palestine.
 There have been many men, but never such
 A Man; His smile was softer than the dew
 At dusk; though keen His energy of thought
 Beneath a halo of sublimity,
 His voice was tender and compassionate,
 As breathing unto earth new sympathies.
 All life's long tragedy became a joy
 As boundless as the sky's unmeasured arch
 Before the mission of this precious Guest.
 Uncharted seas of Death and mystery
 His eyes scanned, like twin angel ministrants
 Exploring for some undiscovered woes
 Beyond the paralyzing darkneses.
 This Christ foretold the storms ere wind-dropt
 cloud
 Had dimmed the sapphire cup of heaven, or
 stopped
 Aurora's steeds in gallop o'er the hills
 And vales and domes of Samaria's land.
 The winds and sea both heeded His command;
 The sick were healed: and cripples walked erect.

BRITANNICUS

From whom did He get such rare mastery?

MYRRHA

Oh list! Britannicus, she told me more:

This Man could make the dead arise; those
mourned

As lost, return, and pay Him reverence
From out the silence of their stony tombs.

[*Pause*]

Now there are some in Rome who say they've
heard

The Christus preaching of Eternity.

BRITANNICUS (*musingly*)

Then Pontius Pilate in Judea ruled.

MYRRHA

Now comes the tragic portion of this tale—

The Jewish priests in jealousy assailed

This Man (whose charms eclipsed all royal birth,

Whose heavenly mission was to soothe and bless)

They seized Him and condemned, for blasphemy,

They scourged Him, mocked Him, giving Him a

crown

Of thorns, then crucified between two thieves.

[*Pause*]

Three hours He hung in pain, then died: 'twas
writ

That by his Death, redemption then was born.

But when He died the sun withdrew its light,

And tempests rang in wrath from out the clouds;

The dead arose and cerement-clad became

As living things, made fleshly sounds and dropped

Great drops of blood from blackening lips. These

cursed

With woes the people which had done this deed.

That night the stars seemed to go mad in heaven,

The heathen gods before the Crucified
Turned pale and swayed upon their pedestals
While fear and quakings filled the shrieking air.

[*Pause*]

Friends took the mangled Body from the cross
And laid Him in a tomb, then rolled a stone
Before it. But still more, O wondrous more!
She told me slowly, line by line, the tale
Of Christus' love and great compassion,
She, bathed in tears through her belief in all,
I, listening, thrilled adown into my soul.
Anon a smile stole o'er her tear-wet cheeks:
"Behold!" she said, "upon the third day's dawn
He rose as He had often prophesied
To all of those who showed their faith in Him."
O strange Return! Celestial odors filled
The air as bent the flowers before His tread
Kissed by the robe that flowed about His feet.
He moved in majesty divine of light,
In calm repose across the vales redeemed
And solaced in that Joy so long delayed.
The multitudes then sang or laughed, some wept
Before that tender, all inspiring smile
In whose sweet light were sorrows lost, and pain
Forgotten in the radiance of its peace;
The holy brow showed neither age, nor marks
Of earthly time. Each feature shone divine
Beneath a circling ring of mystic light.
The very winds blew harp-like chords from
heaven
Along the keys of Harmony sublime.

Upon the trees there seemed no single bough
Nor leaf but stirred and moved in reverence.
So Nature bowed to her Divinity
As verdure spreads an altar for the Rose.
They loved Him now, who doubted ere the Cross.
They sought His mercy, King of Glory now:
"O Light of life, illumine now our souls
And judge us not according to our sins."

There stood the Balm, Whose healing streams of
love

Flowed gently in the many thousand wounds
Of dire afflictions and of sinfulness.
Whom call you God if He was not a God?—
Britannicus! Was He not very God?

Five little senses dare not challenge Him
Nor all the legions Time and Rome amass.
"Bless us and pardon, and be pitiful."

So spoke the multitudes surrounding Him.

Some few weeks later—'twas a morning bright,
The hour when forest choirs pour out their souls
In melody,—He stood on Olivet

And comfort spake he to His disciples true,
And others who in wonder followed Him.

Adoringly they sought His eyes; He blessed
Them with His hands uplifted, prayed, then gazed
Aloft, while on the languid mountain slopes
The air grew tense with awesome mystery.
He spoke then to the wond'ring multitude:

*"Know ye, yon sun reflects my Father's love:
And when a tempest cometh on the earth*

*'Tis oft the tears of angels shed in grief—
For human sins and cold ingratitude."*

A golden cloud descended from the sky,
Enveloping the Christus standing there.
This mystic haze about Him wove a veil
Of brilliant hues, He now commenced to rise;
He paused, He gazed on high, majestic,
And all the Memories of God uprose
Omnipotently pulsing in His soul.
Ascending slowly unto Paradise
He lifted hands in blessing. Man redeemed
From sin and death, His task was done; thus He
Returned again to heaven whence He came.

BRITANNICUS

What may this mean? 'Tis madness all and yet
What beautiful, divine beneficence!

MYRRHA

"Remember then," said Agrippina's maid,—
"All nations yet will pay Him reverence."

BRITANNICUS

I've seen these Christians living here in Rome,
A lowly lot for such a narrative.

MYRRHA

But dear, my lord, I know the tale is true.

BRITANNICUS

Sincerely and perhaps as truly told.
Your Druids would not like this Israel-God.

MYRRHA

His life was love: His doctrine all divine:
His death the very sacrifice of God!

No rock, no sepulchre could hold Him fast.
 He rose from death in such Divinity
 Of truth, of mercy and omnipotence,
 Before it Nature must admit herself
 A sage of faculty most limited.

BRITANNICUS

What mystic teachings, or what influence
 Flow from this Christus, Myrrha, I know not;
 Ah will you judge me more unkind for that?
 Yet this I know, if Christus doth inspire
 Such purity as dwelleth in your soul,
 Your eyes, come, preach to me Éternity,
 Say: "Life is everlasting; Death is dead,"
 Thou Rome, erect the grandest temple earth
 Hath ever known, for Him they crucified.

MYRRHA

And so Rome will, my lord, Rome will, Rome will!
 [Voices heard approaching]
 [BRITANNICUS, rising, looks into the hall]

BRITANNICUS

Hark, hark, I hear, see there the Empress coming.
 And by her limps Locusta, hateful witch—!
 Surely that means some mischief is astir.

MYRRHA

I hate your Empress, she is hard to all;
 Her heart is granite and her veins are ice.

BRITANNICUS

Hush, hush! such words o'erheard might mean
 your death;
 The frailest thought expressed is dangerous.

She builds mock thrones for her own son,—she
dreams
That he will be the next to rule in Rome;
Imperial Caesar's title comes to me.

CURTAIN

SCENE II

A few moments later.

PLACE—Rome

SCENE 2:

In one of the magnificent private reception apartments of the Empress Agrippina in the Palace of the Caesars.

The room is decorated with every resource of art. On the right especially prominent is the Empress' couch enriched with gilding and ivory. Adjacent to this is seen a large opening evidently leading to the inner apartments, in front of which hang handsome curtains. To the left is a doorway leading to the outer halls.

The room is brightly illuminated. The lights glint on statues of gold and silver, on marble bas-relief and on the walls glowing with painted peacocks, winged genii and graceful arabesques. About are vases of perfumes, incense and spices, and other

appointments all of the most costly, rich in harmony of color and design.

[Enter AGRIPPINA and LOCUSTA]

AGRIPPINA

Well! what's the matter? speak!

LOCUSTA

The deed is done.

AGRIPPINA

You say to me "the deed is done"—fie, fie!

I trifle not with you, your schemes scent blood
Like those of hags infernal loosed from hell.

LOCUSTA

But of necessity, for I'm a slave.

AGRIPPINA

'Tis said she-devils walk on cloven feet;
You are too insolent to value life.

LOCUSTA

My art in poisoning called forth your smile;
I was your handmaid most obedient.

The Emp'ror's dead. With him at rest, you have
Your wish more sure than by the law's decrees
Which bandy logic on a waxen scroll.

AGRIPPINA

For my soul's peace begone!

LOCUSTA

The Emp'ror's dead.

Now has my lady further need of me?

AGRIPPINA

I'm filled with doubts, you have a scoffer's eyes.

LOCUSTA

Nay, rather thank mine art, which wisely though
Unjustly struck the just.

AGRIPPINA

'Tis well, now go!

And do not prowl about—get to your room.

[*Exit LOCUSTA*]

Ah why should I be trembling at the whims
Of this vile slave whose machinations have
Released Rome of a Caesar's villainy?
I'm not unlearned in the lore of schemes;
All now submits to my despotic sway.
Yet this I've done for Rome. Germanicus,
Thy daughter never yet has stooped to shame
In banquet hall nor for carnality
Inspired by Venus served in shames of lust;
The gossip for such vices names not me.
Law to ourselves is to be virtuous
Still virtue needs to have her share of power;
So it is well that Claudius is dead.
Locusta's fatal mushroom wrought good work
Dripping foul poison from its velvet rims.

[*Sighing*]

I am most weary, but I must not sleep
For then remorseful dreams oppress my heart
And tune dull conscience into energy.
Disturbèd thoughts need not apologize
For acts whose benefits are not matured.
Now I will here cast off my crown as queen
Remembering only now a mother's claims.
How wonderful a thing is mother's love!

That love would rather stoop in beggars' rags
 And kiss her children's feet than give her lips
 Unto a kneeling king. So Nature rules
 Despite the curse of our domestic ills
 With all the stratagems which they demand.
 Though crime here whispers from the dangling
 stars

Their lights will soothe the front of my offense.
 Consume the past in all forgiving fire
 When my son Nero is crowned Emperor.

[*Enter XENOPHON. He turns, pushes aside the
 curtains and points to the body of the poisoned
 Emperor who is discovered lying on a couch.*]

XENOPHON

He's had his due and passed.

AGRIPPINA (*with agitation*)

What then? What now?

His erring course is ended; Nero lives
 To grace the throne of Rome.

XENOPHON (*aside to himself*)

She is content;

More cruel marks of history are there;
 By woman's fury deeply scarred and oft.

[*AGRIPPINA moves through the entrance, stands and
 looks down coldly at her dead husband.*]

AGRIPPINA

Farewell my spouse, poor shuffled heap of dust!
 The grave-worm now will scrawl thine elegies.
 Canst thou provoke me more fond Claudius
 Since Death has drawn the blood from out thy
 cheeks?

No more warm kisses for thy frozen lips;
 Thou hast at banquet crammed thy last full meal,
 While in my bed thy viperous breath shall ne'er
 Again disturb the sweet delights of sleep.
 Should I be disrespectful to the dead?

XENOPHON (*impatiently*)

What profit persecuting senseless clay?

AGRIPPINA

Let us be on our guard.

XENOPHON

Trust me, I'll not
 Betray; the state now stands secure.

AGRIPPINA

Ah, yes;
 Hence go in haste and the Praetorians tell.
 [*Pointing towards the corpse*]
 But first, O master doctor, draw those veils,
 That thing, that nothing has a ghastly smile.

XENOPHON

Fear not my queen—

AGRIPPINA (*nervously*)

I did not say I feared;
 But I'll not stand and argue right and wrong.

XENOPHON

There'll be some discontent, some rumours wild
 Because here still survives the lawful heir.

AGRIPPINA (*removing some of her jewels*)

Pour out these pearls and give them bars of gold.
 Go, use your judgment as to this event;
 Fear not for your reward; it shall suffice.

XENOPHON (*aside to himself*)

A woman's promise is a cheap return.

AGRIPPINA

If your profession would be long esteemed
Place this beyond suspicion now, and blame.

[*Exit XENOPHON through doorway leading to outer halls.*]

Oft Opportunity's a friend unseen
In this long life of looking at the skies;
And so, as we meet Riches' great advance
Likewise greet Opportunity; improve
The fleeting moments when it visits us,
The seasons then will fall in rare success
Upon the year of our ambitious hopes.

[*Enter a SOOTHSAYER*]

[*AGRIPPINA noticing his timidity*]

Why, why old man, why do you shrink from me?
Throw wide the star-routes—time was made for
use.

SOOTHSAYER

Divine Augusta, wouldst thou have the truth?

AGRIPPINA

Quick tell me all.

SOOTHSAYER

But all takes several ways.

AGRIPPINA

Are there uncommon portents in the skies?

SOOTHSAYER

If thou hast erred, be glad if thou art blamed:
Most sure shall Nero reign.

AGRIPPINA (*smiling*)

Is erring there?

SOOTHSAYER

I could not counterfeit; wouldst thou hear more?

AGRIPPINA

What do you mean?—go on.

SOOTHSAYER

Thy son shall reign

But kill his mother.

AGRIPPINA (*angrily*)

Liar! by the gods!

If that's the scroll you read within your globe

Of starry craft and feigning signs, I want

No more of such deceitful augury.

What witness have you for this cobwebbed lie?

SOOTHSAYER

Man cannot change the course of stars, nor strip

The skies of Fate-made garments spun in storm

And death—

AGRIPPINA

Out, ere I slay you, mouth of guile!

[*Exit* SOOTHSAYER]

[AGRIPPINA *rises and with her hands clasped behind her head walks back and forth.*]

I had forbidden any Fate unknown

To come into my presence—fie, fie, fie!

Why did I parley with that conjurer

Who lets the stars grin down out of the clouds

To fill the crystal of his prophet-orb

With pictures of my son—a matricide?

What gods may be I know not. Yet I know

'Tis to his mother Nero owes his life,
Hence I've no fear that he will injure her.

[Enter OCTAVIA and BRITANNICUS]

BRITANNICUS (*anxiously, then turning to enter the adjoining room*)

You sent for us? Is father still asleep?

AGRIPPINA (*smiling*)

Do not disturb your father, he must rest.

BRITANNICUS

The doctor said the Emperor was well—

AGRIPPINA

It's true—he's out of pain.

OCTAVIA (*aside to herself*)

O how I hate

Her studied whim-whams and her treachery.

[Addressing AGRIPPINA]

What care we for reports? I'll see my sire.

AGRIPPINA (*standing between them and the curtains*)

Have patience, both of you.

OCTAVIA

Did heaven look on?

AGRIPPINA

Be happy dear Octavia: he is well.

OCTAVIA (*impatently and with slight sarcasm*)

I thank you; but since I am not your child,—

Since kindly Nature holds that I am his,

Have you this right to stand between us now?

AGRIPPINA (*with growing annoyance and anger*)

Yes, I'm his wife, and Empress too, of Rome:

Though all the daughter in your heart may rise

To drown the wife, the Empress still commands.
You shall not see my husband until morn.

BRITANNICUS

I think we'd better wait, Octavia.
Our love should not by any chance, through lack
Of patience cause him to relapse.

OCTAVIA

Still, I'm

Not satisfied. I wish to see him now.

AGRIPPINA (*pushing aside the curtains, but not permitting them to enter*)

Come, through the curtains—look, now see—he
sleeps.

BRITANNICUS (*gazing fixedly through the opening*)

But everything within seems still.

AGRIPPINA

It's fit

It should be so. Pray children, now withdraw.
The Empire asks this boon of you. Goodnight.

OCTAVIA (*to herself*)

She planned this scene which we now act—I know.
I do not trust her. Why then do I go?

BRITANNICUS

Before the morning dawns we will return.

[*Exeunt* BRITANNICUS and OCTAVIA]

AGRIPPINA (*with a long sigh of relief*)

Octavia seemed ready to suspect
The worst. So I did wisely when I drew
Aside those curtains. 'Twill be troublesome
Enough to comfort them tomorrow morn,—
Confronted then with their calamity.

This tragedy is no concern of mine ;
 Now Caesar's title to my son belongs,
 But Agrippina still shall rule the world.

[*Approaching sounds of laughter*]

[*Enter NERO half-intoxicated*]

NERO

O breathing world! I cannot see my own hand
 held thus before my face. Is this room filled
 with smoke or perfume? Holy gods! rejoice
 with me—sweet are the dews of night when
 Acte's kisses rain like dripping combs of honey.
 Ah, wine makes us—makes us happy—makes
 us kings, Emperors, Caesars. But who—who
 took me from Acte?

AGRIPPINA

Come here to me. (*to herself*) A fit beginning
 of his reign.

NERO

Hell and damnation! Death to the fellow.
 Jealous! What's that? Why, pray what
 woman would have an eye for anyone but me,
 after she hears my latest verse? I keep
 company with none of the sex who do not
 appreciate poetry; and Acte's eyes flash fire
 when I recite.

AGRIPPINA (*loudly*)

Nero—

NERO (*looking up*)

Goddess of day, goddess of night, rejoice! (*rec-
 ognizing his mother*) Pardon me, mother, most

praised, most loved mother, most ex-ex-excellent mother.

AGRIPPINA

Have sense hereafter, sir, for due respect.

NERO

Thy praise doth wander through the eyes of stars.

O Bacchus, mother, see the waking stars.

Oh, my Falernian—

AGRIPPINA

Silence, silence, son!

You Nero, hardly know what precious gifts

May rise to glad you from a mother's love.

NERO

Look you there, madam, who could in justice love and not love his mother best? I'm a frank person. I love to be envied, and the only love I envy is a mother's love. Who can match its faith and constancy? If you have a beautiful and loving mistress, she will only be beautiful and loving as long as you give her jewels, a table full of dainties and a play-house full of rogues. No, this is not a poet's imagination, but the flesh and blood of a poet who has had mistresses among the choicest Rome affords.

AGRIPPINA

But not a wife, my son, remember that!

NERO

Beautiful word "wife." Why put me on the rack at seventeen summers and nip each inch of manhood out of me with the pin pricks of a creeping plague? Marriage may be discretion's law, but

if there's an atom of right in connubial bliss,
the cure is worse than the offense.

AGRIPPINA

You never have been married, Nero.

NERO

No, mother, but you have. Therefore, I think I apprehend the mood. The smirks of Claudius have not been pleasing to your eyes. I am sobered now, what is it you want of me?

[Sudden sounds of acclamation are heard from without the Palace; they grow louder and louder, distinguished by cries of "Nero," "Nero Caesar," "Nero Imperator." A few but rather feeble and discordant cries are heard acclaiming for BRITANNICUS.]

[Enter BURRUS]

NERO

Burrus, thine eyes are like a Basilisk's:
If it be needful, scruple not to speak.

BURRUS

The Emp'ror's dead. Hail, Nero! Caesar, now.

[NERO starts and appears to grow more sober.]

NERO

"Hail Caesar"—Burrus? "Caesar" sayest thou?
I had not hoped so soon to wear the name.

BURRUS

The tidings of his death have spread abroad.

[Shouts from without]

NERO *(looking inquiringly and anxiously towards*
AGRIPPINA)

He hails me "Caesar," mother, what means this?
'Tis no fit time to utter such a jest.

VOICES FROM WITHOUT

Apollo Nero! Nero Hercules!

AGRIPPINA (*proudly*)

Hail Caesar!

[*The Empress moves, pulls aside the curtains and beckons Nero to enter the room. He crosses the threshold and is seen gazing down at the body of*
CLAUDIUS.]

NERO (*coming out of the room*)

I will look no more but learn.

[*Turning to AGRIPPINA*]

Tell me of this and by whom was it done?
For Caesar's deaths are seldom natural.

AGRIPPINA

For strokes of Fate, I cannot answer, son.

[*Shouts from without of "Nero, Imperator."*]

NERO

A thousand thunders! hail me "Caesar?" No!—
Give me instead red grapes and lovely maids,—

AGRIPPINA

I do not understand, you must be mad.

NERO

Let bulls and rams rule Rome, not poets, now!

AGRIPPINA

You are not just to me!

NERO

Treason has such

A smooth brow, mother.

VOICES FROM WITHOUT

Nero Caesar! Hail!

NERO

Ah, that sounds wondrous well, but I'm no fool:
The safest life is that which is unborn.
If there's no spark of soul, there's none to kill;
And wisest he who sits off thrones in Rome;
I'll not be meat for Brutus' knife to carve.

AGRIPPINA

You are a coward.

NERO

Women love to rule

By tongue at least.

AGRIPPINA

Thou ingrate, silence, sir!

NERO

Look there within! what mock me too? Nay, nay!
A wreath, or crown, a scrap of tinsel sun,
The victor's robes, conspiracies, then death;
A Caesar knows how best to foully die;
I'll not be Caesar—I refuse the crown
And choose my time to immortality.

BURRUS

But Rome was never honored so before.
I know thy modesty; but Caesar mark,
The throne invites a god and not a king.

NERO

"A god and not a king," why,—that sounds well.

BURRUS

Aye, through thy great prerogative of verse
Thou art by style and state immortalized;

Hence Death's authority is overthrown
Forever on this seven-mountained Rome.

NERO (*after long thought*)

They want me Emperor?

BURRUS

Nay, deity,

Our fount of eloquence!

NERO

Then shall it be.

BURRUS

Apollo, Nero, Imperator!—Hail!

AGRIPPINA (*to herself eyeing her son rather suspiciously*)

A deity brings no conclusions here;
Means he may use—or, if he choose, misuse.

NERO (*proudly*)

Though I was born to rival Homer, blind,
I'll operate for Rome's embellishment
And progeny of nobleness; 'tis well!
Now will my god-like genius change the world.

AGRIPPINA (*aside to herself, looking sharply towards*

BURRUS *and* NERO)

Fair words may open many catalogues
Of character, and for the time, at least,
Make cowards walk with bravery's pedigree.
I do not like this weakness in my son;
This flattery will edge his appetite
And so rob me of half my victory.

[*Enter* SENECA]

SENECA

My greetings, Caesar! Greetings, royal youth!

Behold how now the stress of ages calls
For readjustment.

NERO

Seneca, although
Old realms may terminate and new commence,
My throne shall shine by your philosophy.

SENECA

'Tis easier to give advice than take.

NERO

The Caesar's power is counsel absolute.

SENECA

What one day gives another takes away,
Thus power must with discretion tempered be.

AGRIPPINA (*calling SENECA aside as NERO turns again
to talk with BURRUS*)

Why do you argue with him here? He seems
To be too easily moved by flattery
And will I fear get soon beyond control.

SENECA (*with slight expression of contempt*)

Ill acts through ill must bring their own reward.

AGRIPPINA

Most deeds I do, I do for Rome, my friend,
And hence I feel tonight most woe-begone.

SENECA

Our miseries are endless, lady, if
We stand in fear of possibilities.

AGRIPPINA (*to herself*)

I do not sin, it's one within me sins
Who leaves the body but remembering guilt.

SENECA

Since you have what you wished, Augusta, be

satisfied. No one should fear, no one should shriek out in remorse who goes to himself for what he wants. Our minds are above fortune, but our deeds are our own; therefore, do not rail against Fate, do not be unjust to the gods. The fear of anything is slavery, the contempt of it is liberty.

AGRIPPINA (*glancing into the room where the body of CLAUDIUS lies*)

Do you not fear death? What it is to die?

SENECA

Not at all, dear lady. Death is the certainty of visions gone, before which Life played mere jester. But why such thoughts in this hour of your triumph? Death is just as much a debt as money and no man should fear to pay his debts; furthermore, to suffer death is the law of Nature, and it is a great comfort that it can be done but once.

AGRIPPINA

O inconstant man! I say no more.

SENECA (*aside to himself*)

Better to die, than that its deadly thoughts
Should seize the mind; for then the soul becomes
A Hell within, where wretched errors take
The shape of devils, and transgressions reign;
So vilest thoughts with rankest deeds must range,
And by their own abuses reckon up
Through these short-numbered hours of fickle
Time
The debt that's due to sovereign Deities.

[*Turning to NERO*]

Good-night, my royal pupil; now that you
 Are master of the world, heed still my rede,
 But heed especially your mother's voice.
 A mother, Nero, is the noblest gift
 The gods bestow on man, more precious far
 Than all the treasures of humanity.
 If you have dark and secret discontents
 And sorrows gnawing frail mortality
 Most fitting is it you should go to her
 Whose love endures with unextinguished fire.

NERO

I am most indebted to you both; the one-half of
 my executions shall be based on your good phil-
 osophy, the other on the example of my noble
 mother.

SENECA (*to BURRUS*)

Put on him now the purple and the crown.

[*To NERO*]

Tomorrow we'll attend you to the Court.

[*Exeunt SENECA and BURRUS*]

NERO (*turning to his mother*)

Just and inevitable that I reign!

AGRIPPINA

But why idealize yourself a god?

NERO

To set things right—'tis what the mob admires.
 Now will I overstar the splendid stars
 Of night, outstorn the sea's untimely rage
 From anguished continents to distant isles;

Then on the skies' prodigious meteors
I'll build a palace made of gold and pearls.

AGRIPPINA

Wade not too far, my boy, in waves of pride;
You owe this glory all to me. The throne
We two shall share—together rule the world.

NERO

Together?

AGRIPPINA

Both.

NERO

Nay, why not I alone,
To rule it through mine own integrity?

AGRIPPINA (*aside to herself*)

Ha! there's an alteration in his soul.

[*Aloud*]

For two can rule with somewhat greater power.

NERO (*to himself, noticing his mother's distress*)

I will be Caesar, but I'll humor her.

[*Aloud*]

Well, as you will, so be it mother mine:
Within our realm there shall be perfect trust
And tyranny shall fall.

AGRIPPINA

So may it be!

NERO

As once my ends were yours, so doubly now.
A happy era draws upon the world:
Let never man believe in happiness,
Who not was born, nor lived in Nero's time.

AGRIPPINA

Hail Nero Emperor, Caesar hail!

[Smiling]

Remember, though, that Caesars are not gods.

NERO

Now I must go.

AGRIPPINA

And why?

NERO

To Acte's home:

Farewell, dear mother, till tomorrow morn.

[Exit NERO]

AGRIPPINA (*looking towards NERO as he retires*)'Tis almost finished now. There's little more
To do.

[Shouts from without]

The multitude he called his friends!

Poor Claudius, dost see what issue takes

Thy plans when Death with cold and perfect poise

Enfolds thee on thy pyre? Ha, ha, 'tis well!

And yonder stars are falling down, great gems

For me to girdle, blind and bind the world.

I must wed Nero to Octavia,

Both to preserve the Augustinian line

And wean him from this Acte, lowly born.

Youth without prudence chooses oft those loves

Most unbefitting to nobility.

Age may do what is right, youth what it lists.

Octavia knows little of intrigues;

Their nuptials be my step behind the throne.

One move could ruin all; let me take time
But it must not be needlessly delayed.

[*Enter BRITANNICUS followed by OCTAVIA*]

OCTAVIA

Alas my father! woe and misery!

[*Glaring at her stepmother*]

You stand, you look compassionating me?
Away! mine eyes are opened to your lies.
My poor dear father! hear me: look on me!
For one short moment open your dear eyes.

[*Sobbing*]

This is Octavia, your little girl!

I am so full of woe. Will you not speak?
Will you not clasp your child, cold loving arms?
See now I come to claim you. Why, oh why
Can I not with my strength raise you from this
Cold helplessness?

AGRIPPINA (*aside to herself*)

I cannot bear this scene.

[*Aloud*]

Good-night, Britannicus, I'd best leave you
And you, Octavia, with your heavy grief.

[*Glancing at the corpse*]

The worst day of one's life is oft the last,
Well, Claudius, for you that day is past.

[*Exit AGRIPPINA*]

BRITANNICUS (*standing closely beside OCTAVIA and
gazing on his dead father's face.*)

Ah, father dear, nobility's bright seal
Is still upon your countenance, and from
Your brow life's majesty hath not yet fled,

Must soon these features fail: and soon your lips,
 Your cheeks grow pale, relinquish beauty's pride
 For dusts that bargain with the careless winds?
 About this wreck is something royal still
 Which mighty Death respects. From these closed
 eyes

Immortal longings reach beyond the stars
 And live. Though life in time must end,—the soul
 Shall never die, that warmed this kingly brow,
 This canopy of thoughts mysterious seat;
 Not all our deeds and works, our hopes and loves
 Shall shrink and narrow down to nothingness
 In crumbling clay. Death leads to fuller life!
 O little self so lost in jungle-wilds
 Of vanity! How quickly Death will feed
 In all its million cruel ways on this
 Our one imagined godhead, wondrous self!

OCTAVIA

We stand tonight upon a precipice.

BRITANNICUS

'Tis drawing near to dawn,—we must retire.

OCTAVIA

No, no, I cannot go! what shall I do?
 I trust her not—I trust not Agrippine!
 She shakes her head and mutters sympathy.
 My noble father! O you sifting dusts,
 Dear relics of our childhood, you cry out
 Perhaps against oblivion; while we
 Still live and feel; we hear your voice, strange,
 strong,
 Compassionate. By this last kiss—to these

MYRRHA

Poor streaming eyes O turn and hear me call
And pity my estate.

BRITANNICUS

Dear sister, come.

[Enter MYRRHA]

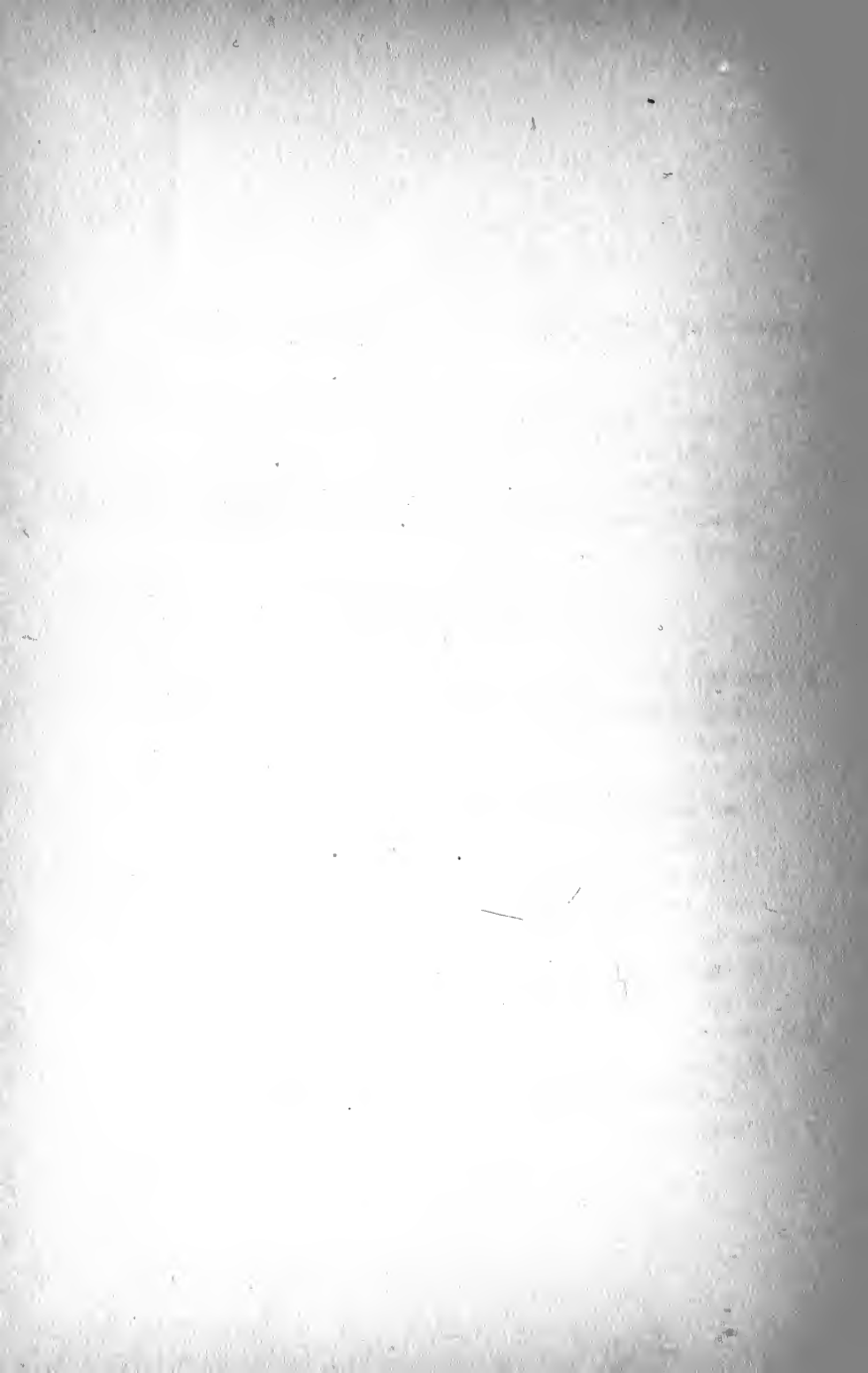
[*The girl steals softly towards the adjoining room, peers in, turns back, then kneels quietly upon the floor.*]

MYRRHA (*clasping her hands in prayer*)

O Christus, Christus, Prince of Mystery!
Thine Advent here, let it be now proclaimed;
Thou Miracle of God—Redeemer, Thou
Bring comfort to these children in their grief.

CURTAIN

ACT II



ACT II

TIME—Two years later.

PLACE—Rome

SCENE I:

A street. In the background are distant palaces. To the left a fountain of Neptune is splashing. As the curtain rises a half-grown lad is discovered sitting on the base rim of the fountain and sobbing bitterly.

[Enter BRITANNICUS]

BRITANNICUS

What is your name? Why do you weep, my little man?

EPICETUS

They call me Epictetus; I am the slave of Epaphroditus the Emperor's secretary. I fell and hurt my leg against this fountain. Nay! Do not be angry with me, I will bear the pain.

BRITANNICUS

It surely was a heavy fall to so have lamed you. You must have twisted your leg.

EPICETUS

My leg was broken, Prince, but not by accident, as I shall tell you. I was deformed from birth and useless: still, my master thought that he

might turn me to some good account by teaching me philosophy. Therefore, he made me book carrier to his son, who attends the lectures of Musonius Rufus. Musonius was good and kind, allowing me to sit near by and listen. I'm not a stoic as yet but I shall try some day to be.

BRITANNICUS

But you are not telling me about your hurt: how did you become so lame?

EPICETUS

Some weeks ago, most noble Prince, it chanced,
As I was walking past the Aventine,
I met a leader of this Jewish sect,
This Christian superstition, now in Rome:
And spreading in Trans-Tiber rapidly.

BRITANNICUS (*frowning*)

Who is their leader?

EPICETUS

Paul of Tarsus, Prince.

A Jew by birth, quite bent with age. He then
With Rufus of Cyrene, Simon's son,
Held converse and I loitered there to hear.
I heard him say how Simon gave some aid
When Christus bore His Cross to Calvary.
Then Paulus spoke to all. There was indeed
Much good in his philosophy,—I felt
Forthwith impelled to spring and cast myself
Before his dust-stained feet. "Be comforted,"
He said, "in sickness and in dire distress,
In all of life's afflictions strive by Faith.

And be against earth's sin and vanity,
Strong doers of the good, nor merely hear."
He had a gracious countenance and what
He said seemed true, and right, and beautiful:
His statement calm, and majesty of phrase
His teaching certified,—it banished doubt.
"Him Peter, John and many others saw
Upon the third day risen from the dead;
And spoke with Him in old Jerusalem.
They saw Him rise in glory to the sky.
Myself beheld the Christ, when from my horse
Upon Damascus road, in blinding light
He struck me in my pride and bade me cease
My persecution of His followers.
First, let your wisdom show that we speak false,—
This testimony may not be denied,
So many trusty witnesses affirm."
So spoke the Jew, and it was hard to doubt.
My master then appeared and angrily
Rebuked me for my loitering; he bade
Return with him to pay the penalty
In pain, for list'ning to seditious speech.
Straightwith he ordered that they twist my leg.
This hurt me terribly, but I had heard
The words of Paulus bidding to endure.
I only cried, "If thou dost go on thus,
Thou'lt surely break my leg." He did go on,
He broke my leg. I did not cry out then,
And I'm ashamed to be seen weeping now.
O that I'd never seen the walls of Rome,

But could return to bright resplendent Greece,
To see its palaces and shrines again!

BRITANNICUS

Poor lad! Come with me to my sister, she
Is kind and will I'm sure relieve your pains.
Let's not be sorrowful, for grief the gods
Offends.

EPICLETUS

The Empress is beloved by all.

BRITANNICUS

This Paulus here, of Tarsus,—let me hear,—
Say on, what more you know,—where dwells he?
Tell

With whom consorting, while he bides in Rome?

EPICLETUS

He preached in Ephesus, in Corinth too,
Philippi and in Thessalonica;
My lord, his wisdom seems in many ways
Profounder than the learning here in Rome.
He teaches of a life beyond the tomb,
And that his Master was the Son of God.

BRITANNICUS

And, Epictetus, where is his abode?

EPICLETUS

The house of Aulus Plautius knows him well:
'Tis said in fact the noble Aulus' wife
Has now embraced this Faith.

BRITANNICUS

There you are wrong:
Pomponia would not heed such foolish talk.

EPICLETUS (*seriously*)

There must be One who scattered seeds of stars,
Created years, from chaos drew this earth;
Then breathed the immortal soul and life in man.

BRITANNICUS

Yours is most amateur philosophy;
Musonius surely, never taught you that!

EPICLETUS (*glancing down the street*)

See Paul of Tarsus coming now, this way:
The people gaze upon him curiously.

BRITANNICUS (*looking in the direction indicated by
his companion*)

Stand by, my lad, and I will speak with him:
Indeed, there's something noble in his mien.

[*Enter PAULUS OF TARSUS*]

[*The Apostle is seen to be slightly bent with age,
but has in his step the carriage of a Roman patri-
cian.*]

BRITANNICUS

Hail, Jew!

PAULUS

A Roman citizen, as well.

[*Recognizing BRITANNICUS*]

Greetings, my lord, our Prince Britannicus.

BRITANNICUS

And whither are you going? answer, friend.

PAULUS

About my business, Prince.

BRITANNICUS

That may be well,
But durst thou answer thus when Ceasar speaks?

PAULUS (*calmly*)

I render unto Caesar what is his.

BRITANNICUS

Our only homage unto Caesar is:

What is your work?

PAULUS

My Master's.

BRITANNICUS

Pray, good sir.

Whom do you serve?

PAULUS

I serve the Son of Man.

BRITANNICUS (*with irritation*)

Speak not in riddles, Jew. Why, who is He?

What right have you to use the tongue of gods?

PAULUS

Your pardon, Prince, I use the tongue of Faith,
Revealing clear the Infinite in man.

Is't error if in this deceitful world

I preach the truth? Nay, you agree with me?

BRITANNICUS

There is some force of precept in your words,
A splendid oneness in your politics.

But why disdain our Empire's noble gods?

Be careful of such rhetoric, my friend.

PAULUS

I speak quite plainly out, perhaps a fault.
Dear Prince, your noble spirit must perceive
That vice is over all the world, and Rome
A lighted candle melting fast. What good
These palaces, this mass of pinnacles

Moulding this thing or that into a god?
 Of neither "gods" nor "goddess" does He hear.
 One guide, one Saviour is my pilgrimage;
 There is nor Greek, nor Jew, barbarian,
 Nor bond, nor free; but Christ is all—in all.
 I speak in words to heal the broken heart,
 To sooth the sorrows of a weeping world,
 To turn the emptiness of evil, Prince,
 To fullest worth and living deeds of good.
 I bring salvation from the Son of Man.

BRITANNICUS

Here no conditions, no decrees of man
 May dare control the dark frontiers of Death;
 The noblest forms shrink to the common dust,
 In that foul prison none again may breathe:—

PAULUS

When I yield up this breath, I live to breathe
 Eternal Happiness—His promise true,
 The promise of the Risen Lord.

BRITANNICUS

Ha, ha,

You are a Christian then—a worshipper
 Of Him whom Pontius Pilate crucified?

PAULUS

But testified he found no fault in Him.

BRITANNICUS

Will you not render unto Caesar, Jew?

PAULUS

Yes, Prince, as I have told you, what is his—
 My Master was specific in those words:

With due allegiance I obey Rome's laws ;
 No man may rule the kingdom of the soul.

BRITANNICUS

This Christianity is treason, sir.

PAULUS

How so? We come as teachers not as foes.
 The path of righteousness in essence is
 The same though different in its forms. The sea
 Is one, yet on its many shores are found
 And blent through ages varied tribes and tongues
 And natures widely different, minds distinct,
 Ripened in power or philosophy :
 For all the mountain peaks of Right are one
 Standing immovable and stony-hard ;
 Day has its changing gold, night fickle arts
 But heaven's starry necklace is the same
 Fore'er encircling Time's vast, heaving sea.
 Truth like the stars gives little notice, Prince,
 To movements and short-comings of the world.

BRITANNICUS (*looking at EPICETUS and smiling*)

Indeed, that's not such poor philosophy.

PAULUS

Nothing that's great or good can treason be.

BRITANNICUS (*to himself*)

Something there is that draws me to this man,
 An influence I felt but once before
 When Myrrha told me first this Christus tale.

[*To PAULUS*]

Old Jew, I do believe you are sincere.
 Pray, tell me, sir, where you are going now,
 That I myself may hear your ministry.

You know my lot upon the Palatine
 Is not especially a happy one.
 Fear not that I'll betray your mysteries :
 There's still a soul within the Claudii
 That will find virtue if 'tis hid in Rome.

PAULUS

You are a friend, and I believe you true.

BRITANNICUS

Choose me to prove it, Paulus.

PAULUS

Good, my lord.

Unto the house of Aulus Plautius come,
 Christ's teachings there I will relate to you,
 In no way hurtful to the minds of Rome
 And most befitting your nobility.

[*Enter TIGELLINUS with a file of soldiers*]

TIGELLINUS (*calling two of his men and pointing to*

PAULUS)

Arrest that man and pending my commands
 Have him imprisoned in the Mamertine.

BRITANNICUS (*turning suddenly upon TIGELLINUS*)

Upon what edict, prefect? gently, now.

[*Turning to the soldiers*]

Withhold those chains.

TIGELLINUS (*recognizing BRITANNICUS*)

Shall I be chid—?

BRITANNICUS

Obey.

TIGELLINUS

But surely Prince, street brawls are not for you.

BRITANNICUS

I asked why you have seized upon this man?
So far I note you have not answered me.

TIGELLINUS

On orders from the sacred Emperor.

BRITANNICUS

Is not there noble blood beneath gray hairs?
You shall do nothing to this guiltless man.
Show me your warrant, Tigellinus; oft
You know there's little good in argument.

TIGELLINUS (*becoming angry*)

Can Caesar's brother find him nought to do
Except defend and chat with lowly slaves?
Where are the precepts of the Palatine?

BRITANNICUS (*white with rage*)

Control your insolence! Since when good sir,
Is son of Claudius and of Messaline
Accountable to Tigellinus for
His friends? You grow presumptuous, I say,
You have no warrant for this man—you lie!
Release him, must I bid you twice? If so,
By all the gods, sir prefect, I declare
Your veins before tomorrow shall be drained.

TIGELLINUS (*controlling his anger and motioning the guards to release PAULUS*)

These Christians look not well to Nero's eyes:
He will make much of what you hold for nought.

BRITANNICUS

That is poor patterned sample from your tongue;
With Nero, I myself will settle this.
Come, Jew; come, boy, let us be on our way.

[*Exeunt* BRITANNICUS, PAULUS and EPICLETUS]

TIGELLINUS (*to himself*)

Chafe not Praetorian pride too far, young man.
Your credit doth not stand so well at court.
You shall repay me this embarrassment,
For I can Nero ply with perfect ease.
Already is it rumored that the Queen,
Whose mind ambition rules with despot sway
Will threaten to enthrone Britannicus
Where she has just so foully set her son.

[*Smiling maliciously*]

A ruin, trust me, shall conclude this all.
Fear harrows Nero's soul,—the loss of throne
Usurped:—to what extremes he then may go,
Who knows? Why tarry o'er my cherished plans?
Great resolutions waver if we wait,
Much thought intimidates the strongest heart.
I shall begin to-night; revenge may yet
Surpass those crimes now in the palace rife.

CURTAIN

SCENE II

A few days later.

SCENE 2:

Same as Act I. Scene 2. As the curtain rises, Agrippina is discovered sitting on a couch. She is arguing in rather loud tones with Seneca. The philosopher is pacing back and forth.

AGRIPPINA

I feel at my wit's end.

SENECA

How so? Why scan

With troubled eyes these boyish loves?

AGRIPPINA

Discourse!

Discourse and argue! piling word on word!

SENECA

Why make a tomb of youth's affections?

AGRIPPINA

Of this be sure, my own's my own.

SENECA

And so—?

AGRIPPINA

His low intrigue with Otho's wife must cease;

Poppaea soon will fill this court with shame.

You scoff at my distress—what have I done?

SENECA (*to himself*)

To argument is evil mind averse,

For fear it break down mischief's premises.

AGRIPPINA

My son shall not divorce Octavia.

SENECA (*to himself*)

Is such the waking of her finer sense?

[*Aloud*]

She's barren—marriage is like casting dice.

He should have sons.

AGRIPPINA

By this Poppaea? No!

Divorce is prostitution legalized,

Oft hazards brings, and always self-reproach.

SENECA

I pray the gods, in good or evil times

That I may ne'er with woman argue long.

AGRIPPINA

A woman's aim should be above divorce.

SENECA

Your son's a man.

AGRIPPINA (*sarcastically*)

To do then what he wills?

I praise your wit decreeing right or wrong:

A man! you men may do your wrong, and time,

My friend, will cast its shadow o'er the crime;

But let a woman lose her goodly name

She then is doomed to everlasting shame.

SENECA (*cynically*)

Such novel dogmas on the Palatine;

The question is of Nero, is it not?

AGRIPPINA

At least Octavia holds her tongue; 'tis well;

She does not interfere in state affairs.

SENECA

While Nero trifles you can rule in peace—
He better toys with women than with Rome.

AGRIPPINA

Now what has put this madness in your head?
No, no! Poppaea has no soul at all,
She has ambition, and is beautiful,
But conscienceless she'd gladly seize the throne;
Besides my son shall not defile his wife;
For Rome shall have an Empress not a bawd.
I made him Caesar, do you understand?

SENECA

Lady—

AGRIPPINA

You cannot baffle me with your evasions. Go
teach him singing, dancing, masquerading,
verse-making, stage-playing, any bragging art,
and Greek buffoonery before a lot of fawning
dogs; but his mother, she—I will answer for his
heart. I will be the touchstone for my son's
virtue.

SENECA

But that's not all, you must be wise as well.
Trust not that Nero will be swayed at will,
Especially from this intrigue of his;
Change for the worse oft follows good advice.
That much I fear.

AGRIPPINA

Hence trust it to my care.

SENECA

The glamour of a crown on youthful brows

Will not yield mildly to a mother's word—
It glows the stronger for opposing it.

AGRIPPINA

A fine conclusion—you are frank at least,
But I will handle family affairs.

SENECA

Since you have spoken, Madam, I'll retire.
The flame you've kindled may be hard to quench.
Farewell, my Empress.

[*Exit* SENECA]

AGRIPPINA (*to herself*)

Whom shall I invoke?

A plague on Seneca's philosophy!
Besides, he knows not all, and like a fool
I stand and listen to a dreamer's trash.
Security of mind! where art thou flown?
These hands shall not be severed from their power
By this alluring wanton Nero's found.
When all is done a mother's rule is best,
This even when 'tis o'er an Emperor.
Say that I must be cautious, humble too,
Before this puny phantom I have raised?
Will Nero learn to heed the voice of duty?
Avoid the damning, tempting devils here
At court? They grin at us in graven gods
Beneath each temple-roof. He must be led,—
And yet, I fear it will awaken strife.

[*Enter* NERO]

NERO (*impatiently*)

Your message calls for comment, here I am.
'Tis novel Caesar answers a command.

AGRIPPINA

Not so, I am your mother always, sir,
To whom you ever owe a son's respect.

NERO

Before you then, I'm not an Emperor?
So! I estrange my nature from my crown.

AGRIPPINA

Let us sit down, and, Nero, patient be,
And each see vision through the other's eyes.

NERO

The eye that sees the most is Caesar's eye.

AGRIPPINA

The eye that sees the best is mother's eye.
Do you not know you owe your throne to me?

NERO

Could I forget it, told so oft each day?

AGRIPPINA

Did I not sacrifice a name for you?

NERO

Perhaps; and yet you said, "We two" would rule.
Was it for this that you have sent for me,
To mourn despairingly a throne that's gone?

AGRIPPINA

I'm far from beggared yet. 'Twere wiser far,
To sit and, Nero, heed what I suggest.
I tell you plainly this intrigue of yours
Must cease. Poppea must depart.

NERO

Strong words

And hammer strokes! Ye gods, I'll not hear this!

AGRIPPINA

Already has the rumor reached your wife;
No other woman would endure the scorn.

NERO

What is my rank?

AGRIPPINA

Yes, I have said it, sir.
The Caesar's nuptial bond shall sacred be.

NERO

Now do I hear amiss?

AGRIPPINA

My speech is plain.
I warn you, Nero, 'gainst unkind mistakes.
Marc Anthony might once have ruled the world;
His wife Octavia—

NERO

I've heard enough.
Now mother you have gone too far. Rule Rome
But let my heart alone. Love never shall
A menace prove unto my crown nor state;
Yet all as well as I are bound to love.
If I have found a woman I prefer
Your thought perforce must yield its place to
mine;
Your effigies shall still be on the coins,
Your orders here will always be obeyed.

AGRIPPINA

Who made you Emperor, but I? Come, speak!

NERO

It is no pleasure to be Emperor
If you must spy and dominate this way.

AGRIPPINA (*angrily*)

Ye gods, do you dare call me spy?

NERO

I do.

AGRIPPINA

The daughter of Germanicus called spy
By Aenobarbus! weakling, imbecile!
Poor actor, rag and feather-trimmed! ha, ha!
Nay, pose and rant, or reel off doggerel?
But understand the Senate looks to me:
I did it; yes, my name I sold for you.

NERO

Enough of this, enough, enough, I say!

AGRIPPINA

I was a fool, too rash—

NERO

You weary me.

AGRIPPINA (*pacing back and forth*)

O wronged Britannicus—Octavia!
Ah, yes, Britannicus shall have his right;
I realize now your ingratitude.

NERO

Be still! do you not know I Caesar am,
That premise all superior to Time,
A god among the gods,—before whose word
The temples of the earth may stand or fall?
My fingers can dry up the deepest sea,
My eyelids make of Rome a solitude.
I am omnipotent.

AGRIPPINA

Conceited fool,
You are too proud of your authority.

NERO

Forbear! dare not my patience to abuse!

AGRIPPINA

The gods smite heavily the sin of pride.

NERO

What part of you I be, I do not know,
But part of you I am—that crime is yours.

AGRIPPINA

Conceit has little for security.

NERO

You tax me sorely: I am tired of this!
Such threats as you have made may not prove well
For those whom you employ for your designs.
My riches are the earth! Ah, prostrate Rome
No lustre knows save that which shines from me!
Shall power like mine your puny passion dread?

AGRIPPINA (*relaxing and putting her arms about her son*)

O Nero, I am done with bitter words.
A mother's love both blessing is and curse:—
Where shines the light that will outshine that love?
'Tis like the silent action of the gods,
Oft ill requited,—cast, like pearls to swine.

NERO

And better so since me it cast for Rome
To overlay the world with genius rare,
And feed impoverished divinity.

AGRIPPINA (*sadly*)

My duty is to thee and to the State,
Performing both it seems I'm loved by none.

[*Smiling*]

Would that your gratitude could match your grace.

NERO

Oft patience far outshines ingratitude;
But mother I'll forgive you now this time,
You hold your woman's views, let me have mine!

[*Enter TIGELLINUS*]

TIGELLINUS

Hail Caesar!

AGRIPPINA (*to herself and glaring at TIGELLINUS*)

How I hate this fawning dog.

[*To TIGELLINUS*]

What brings you, Prefect, here between us two?
Go take your business and your schemes elsewhere.

NERO

No, no, he has my perfect confidence.

AGRIPPINA (*sweeping past the Prefect and turning to*

NERO)

In that event your mother will retire.

[*To herself*]

I fear there's mischief now between those two.

[*Exit AGRIPPINA into the adjoining room, closing the door behind her.*]

NERO

Let her depart. She puts my power to proof
At times.

TIGELLINUS (*with insinuation*)

Could that mean danger to your throne?

NERO (*carelessly*)

Did you speak? Well now, what news? Did you arrest, as you threatened, that Paulus?

TIGELLINUS

I had no warrant, Caesar; he is a Roman citizen. Furthermore, when I attempted to execute your orders I was prevented from doing so by your brother Britannicus.

NERO (*reddening with anger*)

Britannicus! did he dare interfere?

TIGELLINUS

Yes, and without some sort of a warrant I was quite powerless. However, I arrested one Epictetus, who was there with the prince. From this prisoner I shall obtain information that may give us a clue to things of great importance and aid us in quickly stamping out a sect which threatens your sacred majesty.

NERO (*to himself*)

Britannicus, eh eh? Britannicus—
 Britannicus—removing him, there would
 No question be of my succession sure
 To Caesar's throne. 'Twould take the sting from
 her

Who threatened this great sovereignty. Fears!
 Risks!

Well! let them come and I shall dare them all.
 Oft there's a time propitious in the acts
 Of man, if he but blink at consequence
 And shun debates his conscience would indulge,
 His very rashness will bring such results

As never prudence chill or scruples vain.
 She lunges at my throne behind his mask,
 Yet prates of mother-love and sacrifice.
 In woman honor moves as shadows do
 And tickles idle ears. Now let me think.
 If I could find some cause to keep him down!
 Assassination, poison, must not be.
 Such policy is bad for those reforms
 Which I shall soon decree throughout the realm.

TIGELLINUS (*noticing NERO's silence*)

You seem good Caesar moved by solemn
 thoughts—?

NERO

In silence wisdom finds her best ally.
 All great events are born with fewest words.
 Now come tomorrow and report to me
 What said this slave you hold in prison now.
 But for the present nothing say about
 Britannicus. I'll balance his account.
 Farewell.

[*Exit NERO*]

TIGELLINUS

For Tigellinus, it bodes well.
 My web weaves now of its own self. I work
 By wit and not by treachery, ha, ha.
 Fear is a pestilence to those in power
 And Nero has the greatest fears put on;
 As I entangle him, I snare them all.

[*Exit TIGELLINUS*]

CURTAIN

SCENE III

The next day.

PLACE—Rome

SCENE 3:

The inside of a prison. The gloomy chamber is walled on all sides with solid blocks of stone, relieved in the background by an entrance. On either side of the entrance are seen two armoured and helmeted guards. In the right wall is a low cut doorway. This is closed and bolted, but evidently opens into an inner chamber.

Enter TIGELLINUS, followed by SERVILIUS. The guards salute the Prefect as he passes them.

TIGELLINUS

You have the boy, Servilius?

SERVILIUS

Prefect, aye,

[Pointing to the door on the right]

He is within; I thought the torture-room
 Would shake his spirit and unloose his tongue.
 The lad himself is not of that vile sect:
 A strange community, this Christian crew!
 I cannot fathom it. The members seem
 Possessed with god-like will and fortitude.

TIGELLINUS (*impatently*)

You have this Epictetus here? 'Tis well.

[He motions the guards to retire]

[Exeunt guards]

SERVILIUS

Not timely though.

TIGELLINUS

Not timely? How is that?

SERVILIUS

Octavia visits here about this hour—

Inspecting prisons is her latest whim:—

She'll have a pious fit and seize our prey.

TIGELLINUS (*smiling*)

Such interference could but aid my plans.

But let's be done with this before she comes.

Where did you find the slave? And how? with whom?

SERVILIUS

Near Plautius' house beyond the Palatine.

No one was with him, Prefect, at the time.

TIGELLINUS

At any cost he must make known to us

The names of those who meet at Plautius' house.

Perchance we'll find in league with traitors now

Our noble Prince Britannicus. If he

Were there—see to it that this boy shall now

Confess. My guess, I think, will not be wrong.

The timely use of such—this treachery

When given Nero of Britannicus

Will serve to his indictment and disgrace,

And lift me higher still within the realm

Of favor. Bring the prisoner now to me.

[SERVILIUS *moves toward the door, unlocks it and goes in to the adjoining room. He returns a moment later with the lad EPICETUS. The aedile*

pushes the prisoner before TIGELLINUS. EPICETUS *appears dazed and starts slightly on seeing the Prefect.*]

Would you go free, my lad?

EPICETUS (*with sudden courage*)

O yes, good sir!

I've done no wrong. Please let me go—go free.

TIGELLINUS (*sternly*)

Well! follow you this Jew? this Nazarene?

EPICETUS

Epaphroditus is my master, sir.

Please let me go.

TIGELLINUS

You worship Christus, too?

SERVILIUS (*grasping the prisoner roughly by the arm*)

Make answer!

EPICETUS

No, I worship gods of Rome.

TIGELLINUS

You visit at the house of Plautius, though?

EPICETUS (*startled*)

Why do you ask me that?

SERVILIUS

Don't question; speak!

[SERVILIUS *takes a whip from the wall*]

EPICETUS (*hesitating for a moment*)

Sir Prefect, yes.

TIGELLINUS

Ah, whom did you see there?

EPICETUS

The leader Paulus: Linus too was there.

TIGELLINUS

But those are Christians; any Romans there?

[EPICTETUS *starts again, moves uneasily but sets his teeth*]

EPICTETUS

And that I should not tell—I will not tell.

TIGELLINUS

Then you admit there were some Romans there?

EPICTETUS

I will not say—I will not answer you.

TIGELLINUS (*to SERVILIUS*)

The whip, Servilius, the lash will loose his tongue.

[SERVILIUS *lashes the boy several times across the back and legs. He utters a cry and falls to the floor.*]

EPICTETUS (*half rising upon one knee*)

O pity!

TIGELLINUS

Did you meet Britannicus?

EPICTETUS

I don't remember.

TIGELLINUS (*to SERVILIUS*)

Put him on the rack;

Now that, I think, will shake his stubbornness.

[*To EPICTETUS*]

Stay boy, give us the name of Romans there,

The names of all, and we will let you go.

EPICTETUS

I can endure the pain, I will not tell.

TIGELLINUS

Do you refuse? The rack, Servilius!

You saucy varlet, you are very bold.

[SERVILIUS *drags the lad beneath the low opening. The rattle of chains and rope is heard, followed an instant later by the agonizing shrieks of their victim.*

TIGELLINUS (*moving over and peering through the doorway*)

Wilt answer now?

EPICETUS (*heard from within*)

I cannot bear it—oh!

TIGELLINUS

Then answer!

EPICETUS

Mercy! no, O mercy, no!

[*Enter OCTAVIA. The Empress is preceded by the two prison guards and escorted by two of her maids-in-waiting.*]

OCTAVIA (*rushing up to TIGELLINUS*)

What do I hear? A child—a child's scream here?

[*She looks about the prison rapidly, then reddens with anger*]

I wish I were a man to strike you dead.

EPICETUS (*from adjoining room*)

O spare me!

[*OCTAVIA moves rapidly across the room, stoops and looks through the low opening*]

OCTAVIA (*in screaming tones to SERVILIUS*)

Stop at once, in Caesar's name!

Release—release him! Bring the boy to me.

[*Turning upon TIGELLINUS*]

You are a coward—think—a child like that!

[*Clasping her hands*]

Shall such black deeds as this eclipse my reign?
I'd rather die enslaved than rule such shame.

TIGELLINUS (*impatiently*)

You are intruding on my orders strict;—
We cannot guide the state by sentiment.

OCTAVIA (*raising her hand as if to strike him*)

Your life shall pay for this new insolence.

TIGELLINUS (*with feigned apology*)

Yes, I was hasty, Empress, pardon me.

[OCTAVIA *paces back and forth impatiently awaiting*
SERVILIUS *to bring in his victim*]

OCTAVIA (*to TIGELLINUS*)

No more of this, vile Prefect. To your knees!
Go down upon your knees to Caesar's wife.

[*The Prefect makes obeisance*]

TIGELLINUS (*to himself*)

Play well my part and I shall win the day
Despite this pious parrot. Patient be,
She'll soon be prostrate as her party is.

[*Enter SERVILIUS, carrying EPICLETUS in his arms.*
He lays the youth roughly on the floor. OCTAVIA
kneels down, lifts the lad's head to her knee and
feels his heart.]

OCTAVIA (*piteously*)

Poor boy!

SERVILIUS

He is unconscious!

TIGELLINUS (*calling two of the guards and pointing to a flask of wine on a small table*)

Give him wine.

OCTAVIA (*kneeling and snatching glass from the guard*)

I'll give it him myself; 'tis pitiful.

[*She pours some of the wine between the boy's lips*]

Look to it men, you shall atone for this.

[*EPICETUS moves slightly and opens his eyes*]

I think he now revives, poor darling boy.

[*Glaring at TIGELLINUS and SERVILIUS*]

For such as you the gods alone can tell

Why they impose such vermin on the earth.

[*EPICETUS chokes and endeavors to speak*]

What would you say to me, dear little boy?

Fear not, they shall not hurt you any more.

EPICETUS (*faintly*)

The pain, the pain—

[*Recognizing OCTAVIA*]

The Empress! can it be?

You must not, Empress, hold a slave like me.

O how shall I begin? O how can I

So thank you—pray the gods to bless your name?

OCTAVIA (*tenderly*)

Your courage is the thanks I value most.

[*To TIGELLINUS*]

Now, Tigellinus, I will take the lad

With me. For you the world has other schemes

To be concluded in a viper's mind.

[*Exeunt OCTAVIA and her maids-in-waiting, followed by the two guards bearing with them EPICETUS*]

TIGELLINUS (*to himself*)

Aye "Madam Empress"—I have other schemes;
But this one you have helped unconsciously.
Woe unto you and to your heritage.

[*To SERVILIUS*]

I go to give the Emperor my report.

[*Exit TIGELLINUS*]

CURTAIN

ACT III

ACT III

The following evening.

PLACE—Rome

SCENE I :

A moonlight night in the garden of the Palace of the Caesars. To the left is a slightly raised terrace beyond which the palace is seen with gleaming lights. The area is relieved by statues, columns, and architraves, shaded by large trees. Low shrubbery and flowers glitter mysteriously in the soft rays of the moon. A fountain is splashing; behind it is an arbored vine and nearby is a stone bench.

[*Enter TITUS, followed by VITELIUS, the dandy, who is half-intoxicated*]

VITELIUS

Heigh-ho, heigh-ho! It is a stilly night
For balladists. Ho Titus! lend your eyes.
See yonder tiring moon, love-full, and white
As Venus slipping into silks. Come down!
Sitt'st thou, fond lady, on thy cushioned throne
Of ivory, seducing youthful stars?

TITUS

Vitelius, good nature may do much
But drunkenness with you is a disease;

Your feet, your hands, your very finger ends,
They never move without the aid of wine.

VITELIUS

Ah, were my temper sober, sir, as yours,
One's life would lose its most romantic half.
Would you, like Nero's wife, cut ope the side
Of vice and heal all man's corruptions?

TITUS

You judge her wrong!

VITELIUS

Nay—Heaven mismated them,
Or rather Agrippina, take my word.
Let me from Courts—who win there, lose. How
fare
Our crowned acquaintances who play and reach
Those heights?

TITUS

Ofttimes their fate is hard.

VITELIUS

Always
Their fate is heavy. Are not statues hard?
Look where you please, back, down, or forward,
who
In Rome retain their entity save when
Their features with the marbled gods are carved?
And if the wings of gossip fly with truth,
Grows now another plot on Palatine.
Perverse and peevish, Nero—

TITUS

Silence, fool—

VITELIUS

While Agrippina jealous of his power
 Knows well who has the title to the throne,
 The rightful heir, Britannicus—

TITUS

Be still!

VITELIUS

His fate is sealed, his life as good as gone.

[*Looking toward the palace*]

Oho! there comes the fair Octavia now,
 Accompanied by that winsome British slave.
 Fate flings these sweets to me. Now listen, friend:
 The flowers were not made for beauty's sake
 They bud to yield their honey—to the bee.
 This bee will sip anon; faith, as I am
 An honest fellow.

TITUS

She is virtuous.

VITELIUS

In woman virtue? Fie! On Palatine?
 Believe you so? Such faith in wenches makes
 Me smile.

TITUS

I warrant you this humour bores.

VITELIUS

This virtue's but a put-on thing, a masque
 Offensive to the clever ranks of Court
 Society. So much for frankness' sake.
 Now let me pass. O here is such a night
 Set up to gaze on trifling chastity!

TITUS

Good patience guide me with this fellow! Come,
Keep we together or part company?

VITELIUS (*as TITUS pulls him by the arm*)

Yes, presently, but—speaking with respect—
Pray what use serves me going that way, sir?
O moon, O Love, I this, thou that, heigh-ho!
Mark, mark and wonder!—bless ye, ladies fair:
By Bacchus, I stay here!—have brains, have
brains.

TITUS

Come, man! in short,—no more of ribald jests.

[*Exit TITUS, almost dragging VITELIUS along with
him*]

[*Enter MYRRHA and OCTAVIA*]

MYRRHA

My best and dearest friend, you were so good
To rescue that poor lad from torture dire!

OCTAVIA

Let it appear so and it pleased me; still,
Through mercy we do oft condemn ourselves.
Now Tigellinus is mine enemy
Who stands in Nero's highest favor here.
This Tigellinus hath a cruel heart.

MYRRHA

Good Empress, do not think of him.

OCTAVIA

Observe

Those trees that oftentimes to the tempest bend,
Still stand unhurt; yet these that brave the storm
Are torn and hurled uprooted to the ground.

You have a gentle heart; you cannot know
 Nor will I tell you. O to dream were sweet
 That I might ever feel the bliss of love!—
 Or at my tender age could be beloved!
 My saddened fate is equalled here by none;
 I'm called to put aside my natural self
 And cheated out of all fair life would give;
 I seem to drift alone to meet my doom.

MYRRHA (*tenderly*)

No, not alone, dear Empress, I am here.

OCTAVIA (*embracing her companion*)

Sweet Myrrha—

MYRRHA (*smiling*)

You have still Britannicus.

OCTAVIA

You are not quite my age, yet understand.
 I look each day upon my husband's face
 Distressed to see that he despises me.

[*Very sorrowfully*]

So I'm enthroned and yet I am a slave;
 O 'twas a monstrous sin this marriage, dear;
 It is so hard—O it is past my strength!
 For like a wall before hate's edge I stand
 Begemmed with precious stones. In every stone
 There lurk the seeds of solitude and fear.
 The crown of Death would have a radiant setting
 To this soul-sick bejewelled recompense.

MYRRHA

The people love you.

OCTAVIA (*endeavoring to smile*)

Little comfort there!

Because I long for joy, for quiet sleep
With love upon my eye-lids.

MYRRHA (*kissing her*)

Empress dear,

Let's bear whatever fortune God may bring.

OCTAVIA (*smiling sadly*)

Come, I will try and let my heart be glad.

Where is Britannicus? Ah, now you blush.

Peace to your fondest thoughts if they're of love.

MYRRHA

I've met him at the house of Aulus, oft.

There's in another world diviner Love

That weighs our motives and propels our thoughts.

OCTAVIA

I've found much solace in those teachings, dear.

Some day I shall go hear their leader speak.

MYRRHA (*to herself*)

Already are some energies undreamed

At work in Rome.

OCTAVIA (*dreamily*)

I wonder what I am

And where I'm from and whither I'm to go,

So thus it is the commonwealth of thought

Yearns on the cliff of Doubt, as through this life

We roam in suffering. We know not whom

To love. To whom shall we pay reverence?

I would believe and yet what to believe?

There must be One who owned us ere we owned.

MYRRHA

The Living God owns us, there is but One.

OCTAVIA

I do not know—I cannot understand;
How cold the process of omnipotence!
Is there a Paradise accessible
From this alluring vileness painted here?
There lies the agony of human thought,
The masterpiece of its imagining,
That spy which spies unsparing on itself
As Conscience pleads for immortality
While Reason coldly crushes hope with Death.

MYRRHA

There will be ever life beyond the stars,
Ah! there's a blessed light beyond the stars,
Whose tender Rays are Christ's Divinity
Bequeathing us eternal happiness.

OCTAVIA

How wonderful, yet doubtful is it all.

MYRRHA

Assurance firm is given in Christus' Faith.

OCTAVIA

Let us now put this seriousness off
And talk about Britannicus. He said
He would be here; he must not find us sad.
Come, tell me—do you love my brother, child?
I ask because I know he worships you.

MYRRHA (*blushing*)

I am no mate for Prince Britannicus.

OCTAVIA

You are so much my brother's mate, dear girl,
You are so much the very soul of him,
He would ascend the chariot of the sun

To range the wilderness of distant space
 To be consumed by Phoebus' flames, if he
 For one day lost the light of your sweet eyes.

MYRRHA

Nor can I longer hide it; I love him.
 But O dear Empress, please my secret keep.

OCTAVIA

Be sure you have not erred in telling me!
 He comes. Farewell! I leave you with your love.

[*Exit* OCTAVIA]

[*Enter* BRITANNICUS]

BRITANNICUS

Awake ye lyres of night to Myrrha's voice!
 Ye solemn sleeping airs, ye nodding flowers,
 Awake beneath the fragrance of her breath!

[*Seating himself beside her*]

Give me those hands, the dearest in the world,
 Press them before mine eyes,—feel there my soul.
 Why dwells that troubled look upon your face?

MYRRHA

There is a time—

BRITANNICUS

When Love will choose to love.

MYRRHA

My lord, why do you greet me in this way?

BRITANNICUS

Why? my heart's jewel! why? because of love.

MYRRHA

Ah, how I dread the fervor of your words.

BRITANNICUS

Such dreads are nothing if you think of love.

How many stars in night's great silence, dear,
Have wept or smiled upon Love's sacred stage.

MYRRHA

This is no play, Britannicus, please hush.

BRITANNICUS

Life is a play, but Love is that play's soul.
I love you, Myrrha! see! a drama lies
Completely writ in those three words. An act
Whose stateliness is measured by itself
And echoes through the fibres of the soul.

MYRRHA

'Tis very strange, I seem to grow in strength.

BRITANNICUS

Love grows apace as life goes on,—my love:
There is no music in Truth's theatre,
No chords of recompense, no loyalty
Unless those words are in the audience.
If there they be, and on the stage as well,
The strangest secrecies of life applaud
In ecstasy, and banish earthly woes
Before that prologue of Love's sympathy.

MYRRHA

O none have ever ventured this before.

BRITANNICUS

And when the play is played—the curtain falls,—
When every declaration is expressed,
No uttered phrase can echo on the dome
Or monuments of Time, to master it,—
To still the resonance of that—I love!
Look on through years, look out upon the ways
Appointed by the world, but hear—I love!

It is in all the lifelong, death-long tales,
 The true, the beautiful: bestowing charm
 To give them life and loveliness and worth.
 Love binds our day-dawn to eternity,
 Our sunrise 'round the sapphire cup of heaven.
 Do not shrink now.

MYRRHA

I understand, I know,—
 Yet there's a time when even love may fear
 And I fear for us both, Britannicus.

BRITANNICUS

Then you do love me, Myrrha? tell it me.

MYRRHA

I have no shame in telling you I do.

BRITANNICUS (*kissing her tenderly*)

Fair Myrrha, sweetest Myrrha, my beloved!

MYRRHA

Am I all yours?

BRITANNICUS

More than I living hoped.

MYRRHA

Ah, clasp me in your arms, take all—take all!

BRITANNICUS

How soon the smile of Love can change the world.
 What do I want with thrones? With toppling gods
 Or any other impulse from the stars?
 Here is fond Nature made angelical.
 To sing diviner hymns into my soul,
 To spread the richest perfumes at my feet.

MYRRHA (*passionately*)

My own Britannicus, my blessed love,

I am so happy. Let me here be ta'en ;
 I could die now and leave life at its best,
 With all its suffering and pains mis-termed.
 O it is all so strange!

BRITANNICUS

That we should love?

[*Passionately looking into her eyes*]

Fair reflexes, my twin divinities!
 So envious the feasting vault of heaven!
 Look down, gaze not upon the wanton night
 And make me jealous of the amorous stars,
 Though glorious be their brightness, yet I swear
 It hath been stolen only from your eyes.

[BRITANNICUS *clasps* MYRRHA *very closely to him*]

MYRRHA

But may I breathe, or just list to your heart?

BRITANNICUS

The very beatings of that heart are yours.

MYRRHA

I fear for you, Britannicus, I fear—
 Could I but tell you—make you understand
 That even in this realm of wondrous night,
 There is a light that shines with fair deceit ;
 A sorrow fretting always close at hand
 Low-moaning here, the while we play with Joy.

BRITANNICUS

Death is the worst that one can dread.

MYRRHA

Nay dear.

But should I part with you—

BRITANNICUS

That ne'er shall be!

MYRRHA

What wonder this? I've suffered so; 'tis nought,
My love, there seems in Rome but cruelty.

[*Voices heard in the distance*]

Hark, is not that the voice of Nero, hark!

BRITANNICUS

And Tigellinus with him.

MYRRHA

Tigers both,

So filled with hate and treachery, see, see,

[*Rising*]

They come this way—

BRITANNICUS

With them is Burrus, too.

Some good god frown on this intrusion.

MYRRHA

'Twas this I feared—when sadness filled my
speech.

BRITANNICUS

Now Nature's cursed already; now hell-bred

Disease with aspic poison fills the air.

Crowned impotence! usurper of my throne!

Why do the gods place him above the rest?

O Hades' portal open for his soul.

[*Turning again to MYRRHA*]

Let not the sight of them annoy your mind.

We'll hence unto the palace now and tell

Octavia of our plighting. Come, sweet love.

[MYRRHA and BRITANNICUS turn and walk up the pathway toward the gleaming lights of the Palace]

[Enter NERO, TIGELLINUS and BURRUS]

NERO

No more of your evasions, Prefect sly,
For evil must be great indeed, if you
Can hesitate to give it tongue. I have
Here your report. My sacred person is
Endangered and my orders not obeyed?
Can find no crime against these Christians, eh?

TIGELLINUS

Your brother goes with them—

NERO

By Hades!—no!

TIGELLINUS

I learned this from the lad upon the rack.

NERO

Britannicus then plots against my life?

BURRUS

Octavia brings you no children: Britannicus must
in any case succeed you.

NERO (*pacing back and forth*)

Did you hear the murmur of applause that greeted
his song the other night? He is not a man of
safe discretion, eh, Burrus? That applause was
most insulting to my sacred talent, which pre-
fers itself, sings itself unchallenged. There are
no critics beneath the gods to judge my work.

TIGELLINUS

It is not so easy to fathom the plans of your
august mother; besides, you are not on such

especial good terms with her at present. Rome would not relish the thought of another civil war.

NERO (*starting*)

True, Tigellinus, true, and my mother's wrath has already shown itself. My love of Rome tells me of more than you can say: I can strike, I must not be weak.

BURRUS (*in low tones*)

As long as Britannicus lives, Agrippina must be dreaded—the Praetorians are ever loyal to the daughter of Germanicus; nor do Seneca's counsels soothe her ambitions. All props would fall with Britannicus.

TIGELLINUS (*to himself*)

I'm not so sure of that. My plans now weave
A web to draw her too into its snare.
I have begun—I will complete the work.

NERO (*in low tones*)

It must be done: Britannicus must die.

TIGELLINUS

Although most bloody be our thoughts put wit
And glamour in their execution, sir.

NERO

What say? Removed, what counterclaim has she?
See to it, Tigellinus, see to it.
A genius has been given to the world
Who must correct its rude unthankfulness.

TIGELLINUS

You have a banquet here tomorrow night:
Now there could be some items at the feast

Which would protect your crown, and yet add
thrill

And novel interest to the whole affair.

Send for Locusta. She is old in trade,

And could make goodly climax of her art.

The associates of your brother should be there,

And thus avoid suspicion in the act;

Young Titus, Myrrha, Lucan and his friends.

NERO

My blood climbs back to where it should be, sir.

I'll do what you suggest.

TIGELLINUS

Ah, that is wise.

NERO

Go, hasten and Locusta send to me.

[Exit TIGELLINUS]

[Looking up with arms outstretched to the firmament NERO becomes engrossed as it were, with his own great personality and power]

O subtle Destiny, o'erhang, frown down!

From power such as mine, bow firmament!

Now tremble whipped, thou vast rotundity

Pent up with lightning, thunder, wind and fire.

The vital air is mine, the waters, mine;

The gifts of Nature, fruitful, fair, all mine;

Here Nero stands, a lone omnipotence

Filched from the womb of chaos, ere a ghost

Or god sad-eyed and envious walked abroad

In realms of un conjectured space. The world,

The splendour of the sun and moon, yon stars

Of rivalry and gems aflame, are mine;

All solvent senses, fumes of reason, mine;
All eyes and ears see not, hear not, but mine.

[To BURRUS]

Performed at supper, eh? Ah, there shall be
A thrill in it; and watch my mother's eyes.
Her words did shake me, Burrus, for the nonce,
Echoing to what is fiercest in my soul;
But sudden waked to this necessity
And fearing loss of my beloved verse,
The gods command fulfillment of their will.

[*The lights go out and the stage is totally darkened
for a few moments*]

SCENE 2:

*A secret chamber in the Palace. There are
practically no decorations nor appointments save
a low throne and a few pieces of furniture to
harmonize.*

There is a small door on the right.

*Nero is seen seated; he appears impatient and
perturbed.*

[*Enter Locusta. She throws herself down, grovel-
ling at the Emperor's feet.*]

NERO

So poison is a trade with thee, eh? This death
must not be long—no pangs, but silent, sure and
quickly done.

LOCUSTA (*looking up*)

O divine one, there's the Julian Law against these poisonings, murders and their perils—

NERO (*interrupting and kicking her*)

Reptile! dar'st talk to me of Julian laws? I am the law, that understand or thou shalt die to-morrow morning (*smiling maliciously*) on the old charges.

LOCUSTA (*cringing and shrinking beneath his gaze and the blow*)

O mighty one, thy word is law! Though the prince is very strong and healthy and the task, therefore, not an easy one, I have a poison that will do the work and at the same time avert suspicion.

NERO (*with an air of malignant satisfaction*)

Ah, thou art an artist; devise something fresh, eh? What shall it be?

LOCUSTA

Let the victim be given a cup of hot wine, that he will find too hot; he will ask then for snow to cool it; in this snow the poison shall be placed.

NERO

Artful wench, well said. See to it, see to it, and thy record shall be cleared. Go now—stay, remember—no pangs, silent sure.

[LOCUSTA makes obeisance and kisses the hem of the imperial toga]

[Exit LOCUSTA]

NERO (*to himself*)

The stage is set, the actors wait my will,
Now must the world acclaim my artist-skill.

[*An expression of absolute malice steals over his
countenance*]

CURTAIN

ACT IV



ACT IV

The next night.

SCENE :

The great Banquet Hall in the Palace of the Caesars.

The walls are delicately frescoed with mythological figures, while the columns supporting the hall are hung with roses and each pillar is festooned with wreaths made of orange and acacia blossoms. There are long tables overlaid with silver and handsome cloths upon which are bejewelled cups of gold and jade and great dishes heaped high with the rarest fruits.

Near the tables are divans and couches covered with cushions of rich silks. Agitated by glittering cords a rain of petals constantly descends upon the tables. Underneath the tables is sprinkled a mixture of vervain and maiden-hair.

Amphorae of wine stand against the walls, and in the background a fountain; behind this is seen a life-size figure of Aphrodite.

Over all is a strange and broken reflection of the evening light; the eastern touch is given by the mist of incense.

Dreamy oriental music is heard.

Guests are discovered entering.

Senators, counselors, nobles and patricians of Rome, foreigners of state from distant realms of the Empire are dazzled by the display of splendor. Among the throng are seen hosts of Caesar's slaves and servants of both sexes. The men servants carry hand-lamps; others are scattering spices, small boys are running about with lutes and harps, while the slave girls and freedwomen are playing cytharas or bearing great bunches of flowers wherewith to decorate the feast.

[*Enter NERO and OCTAVIA greeted by a tumult of applause; they are followed in train by AGRIPPINA, BRITANNICUS, and the other members of the royal suite.*]

[*Enter SENECA, TIGELLINUS, BURRUS, LUCAN, VITELIUS, TITUS FLAVIUS, AULUS PLAUTIUS, POPPAEA, MYRRHA, ACTE, POMPONIA GRAECINA, et al.*]

[*NERO now, amid deafening applause is seen to recline on a couch behind the table, which is in the background. His robes are of oriental richness. His hair is curled and he holds an emerald eye glass. AGRIPPINA, OCTAVIA, POPPAEA, SENECA, TIGELLINUS, BURRUS, and others, also lie behind the Imperial table.*]

[*BRITANNICUS is discovered seating himself on a divan before the lower table in the foreground; on his right is MYRRHA; to his left TITUS.*]

BRITANNICUS (*leaning gently over to MYRRHA*)

Ah, greetings, my beloved! What happiness
To see—

MYRRHA

Britannicus—

BRITANNICUS

What bliss to hear

Your voice.

MYRRHA (*looking about as in fear*)

This chills my soul.

BRITANNICUS

Nay, Myrrha dear,

You have a God, who with His mighty wings
Will shelter you, else He is not of heaven.

[*Enter musicians dressed as satyrs, who now play on lutes and bagpipes. These are followed by a group of professional applauders.*]

[*Following the applause given the Emperor, the banquet proceeds amid the low hum of conversation and tinkling of lutes.*]

[*Caesar now is seen to rise*]

CHORUS OF VOICES

O hear the songs of Nero, poet-god!

BRITANNICUS (*to MYRRHA*)

Now must we bow to Rome's buffoonery.

[*A hush falls over the hall as the Emperor recites one of his own compositions*]

NERO

Bear witness Attis! thou whose lovely eyes
Could e'en surprise the mother of the skies!
Bear witness dolphin, cleaving rolling tides

And gamboling on Nereus' sea-green sides;
 Bear witness likewise, Hannibal, divine,
 Thou who didst scale the high-ridged Apennine.

[*Wild applause*]

You powers hear, in high Olympus' dome
 Who sway the fortunes of imperial Rome
 Give ear,—inspire me with Machlean rage
 That I may so the pangs of love assuage;
 To make the Gallic priests their cymbals beat
 And fair Bacchantes move with tripping feet.
 And chant "Io Bacche!" to the woods around
 And echo from the hills repeat the sound.

[*Long and continued applause*]

[NERO *sits down, assuming a grotesque attitude, smiling delightedly at the adulation heaped upon him.*]

BURRUS (*aside to himself*)

He might be worse employed than shouting
 rhymes!

[VITELIUS, *the dandy, now rises. He is flushed with wine; the wreath he wears has slipped to his eyebrows and ointment is running down his forehead.*]

CHORUS OF VOICES

All hail Vitelius! Vitelius!

VITELIUS

'Tis said Anacreon wrote in witty phrase:

"'Twixt wine and man this difference appears,

The old man bores you, but the old wine cheers."

NERO (*to TIGELLINUS and pointing to VITELIUS*)

What ails that keg of grease?

TIGELLINUS

Beyond cure, mad.

VITELIUS

Our sac-sac-sacred Nero is a god!
 Bear witness Attis! thou whose lovely eyes
 Can see no god but Nero in the skies.

[*Holding his cup in the air*]

Libations to our god among the gods!
 O Homer, how thy Iliad dwindles here;
 Now Virgil, bite thy nails in jealousy.

[*Applause*]

BRITANNICUS (*to MYRRHA who is becoming not only
 ill at ease but terror-stricken as the revelry proceeds*)

The ties of love must never fail to hold.
 Believe me true. Look not that way but turn
 And gaze into my heart. O best of all
 I love you—see you only, feel you here.

MYRRHA

Love liveth in the softly dreaming sea,
 Beneath the trees can laugh and sing—not here.

VITELIUS

To ruby-visaged Bacchus! let us drink!
 My heart—my blood—to Venus and her boy!

[*Pointing to his blossomed nose*]

A charm there is about the color red,
 Suggestive of much warmth and brilliancy.
 Come, ladies, with your priceless gems and clouds
 Of muslin, droop your peplums—show your
 charms!

The statues smile, but you both smile and love.
 Yet loving, wooing—hang it! better drink!

[*Applause*]

[*Staggering back toward his couch*]

Yes, I have lived in this unsteady world—

SENECA (*to himself*)

We sing, we drink, we take, but we are ta'en.

VITELIUS

You are a fledgling, Seneca, without

My wit and art to feel a real thrill

Of passion: sir, I edify this world—

CHORUS OF VOICES

A song from Lucan now! sing, Lucan,—sing!

VITELIUS

Make room: yes, let us have another song.

SENECA (*to himself*)

Oh, what a housing have our vices got!

Contempt of them keeps me from festering.

LUCAN (*rising*)

He fights, plays, revels, loves and whirls and
stands,

Doth use mute eloquence and rhythmic hands;

Silence is voiceful through each varying part,

In each fair feature—'tis the crown of Art.

[*Wild acclamation of "Euge"*]

VITELIUS

Plain critics say—he sings and scribbles well.

LUCAN

Such is our Caesar; happy, happy Rome

Where radiant Nero gilds his palace home;

His gentle looks with tempered splendor shine

'Round his fair neck his golden tresses twine.

[*Applause*]

[*At the sign from NERO enter a troop of Syrian dancing girls naked to the waist, clashing tambourines, with bells on their wrists and ankles. These now whirl in a wild passionate measure. They wave their arms, twist their bodies in lascivious contortions, roll their eyes with invitation, refusal or ecstasy.*]

[*Finally flinging their tambourines to the floor, they stand rigid, affecting a spasm of delight. The girls then approach and retreat from the guests on the couches. Men, young and old, seize the wanton creatures and bear them—some to alcoves behind tapestries, others to their couches.*]

BRITANNICUS (*in tones of disgust*)

Bedizened, falsely smiling courtesans.

[*Flowers and petals continue to drop from the ceiling; the hum of voices increases to cries of delight.*]

[*As the Banquet proceeds all restraint seems to vanish; excitement becomes a fever; unprecedented license prevails. Fresh relays of food and wine are brought in—drunken kisses and embraces become general, draperies are torn or lowered, peplums are cast aside, while both men and women offer little excuse for their actions. Goblets and dishes are dashed to the floor. Here and there slaves are seen assisting or lifting besotted nobles who have rolled under the tables either alone or in the drunken embraces of women.*]

[*The music changes into a disordered and wild outburst of bagpipes, lutes, citharas, cymbals, Eryp-*

tian sistra, followed by the discordant blare of trumpets and clapping of crotolas.]

[More groups of dancers and courtesans enter who mingle with the guests.]

[One of these wantons partly disrobing is seen to throw herself on the breast of VITELIUS. The dandy smiles, blows some of the powder from her hair, kisses her neck and shoulders, then as if suddenly bored by her caresses pushes her into the arms of the other nobles.]

[NERO is seen half bent over the table, dividing his time between making amorous advances to POPPAEA and gazing over the scene through a polished emerald.]

[OCTAVIA, though somewhat more hardened, seems to be undergoing feelings of utter loneliness and disgust.]

[SENECA is talking with AGRIPPINA; they look disdainfully and coldly upon it all.]

[TIGELLINUS appears perturbed, impatiently awaiting the climax.]

[MYRRHA, who has been murmuring all the while in low whispers to BRITANNICUS, is seen to blush, then a look of horror comes over her face. BRITANNICUS shields her as best he can from the clamour and rioting.]

[Large Ethiopians now enter who mimic beasts, while other slaves appear, acting the clown and buffoon for the benefit of the feasters.]

[Enter youths and maidens in masquerade. Some wear masks of the heads of tigers, crocodiles, and

apes; others are clothed in the skins of lions, goats and dogs, dragons and sea-dolphins, or in the plumage of ostriches and peacocks. These creatures now dance, representing respectively antics of the forest or jungle or sea. On finishing this dance of unparalleled licentiousness, the applause and enthusiastic cries of the guests are general.]

[VITELIUS, now holding a cup of wine in his hand passes closely to where MYRRHA and BRITANNICUS are reclining; he staggers roughly against the corner of their couch.]

VITELIUS (*peering at MYRRHA through blinking eyes and swaying back and forth*)

My gate of dawn! My garden of delight!

[*Pushing aside several of the nearby revellers*]

Disperse ye fireflies—pluck not at my rose!

[*Staggering over and whispering to TITUS*]

Remember this I said on yester night:

“The flowers were not made for beauty’s sake,

They bud to yield their honey to the bee.”

This bee now sips; faith, as I am—ah, ah!

[*Turning again to MYRRHA and touching her bodice*]

Fair ivory hills,—to touch I hesitate.

[*MYRRHA pushes him from her*]

I may not love, I will at least enjoy,—

[*Glancing over toward NERO and OCTAVIA*]

Change with each tasting as our Nero there,—

Wives are deficient in the arts of love.

BRITANNICUS (*sternly to VITELIUS, noticing MYRRHA’s fear*)

Begone! She's not the kind who would converse
With you.

VITELIUS (*persistently*)

Sip honey ere the petals close.
So sweet and fragrant, tempting but demure,
Becoming pretty parts, too modest, quite!
Come, marble Aphrodite, just one kiss!

[MYRRHA *repulses him again*]

Still marble? Love's cold statue, passionless!
You should adorn some golden nook at night
Where fragrant incense would your soul affect—

[*Turning to BRITANNICUS*]

Love is a starving sort of ailment here.

BRITANNICUS

Away, away, you fool!

VITELIUS

Another try,

For she is too demure. Come, tell me why—
[BRITANNICUS *by another stern look commands*
VITELIUS *to retire then turns to MYRRHA*]

BRITANNICUS

Who could imagine night of viler madness?

[*Gazing over the festivities*]

And, Reason, where is thy nobility?

MYRRHA

Dear lord, can we not leave the banquet hall
And later to the Emperor explain?

BRITANNICUS (*who is gradually becoming affected by*
his surroundings)

Why are you cold? It is a night for love!
Your very breath is incense to my soul

And wakens me. Come nearer, my dear love.

[*Looking into her eyes*]

The whitest clouds are pillows for your eyes,

MYRRHA (*with slight annoyance*)

If so, my prince, would I could shroud mine eyes,

BRITANNICUS

O queen of soft desires! Dare I embrace

You on this couch of roses sweet and soft,—

[*MYRRHA becomes startled and pushes him from her*]

The recognition of my use in life

Lies in my love for you.

MYRRHA

Britannicus

Forget not your respect—

BRITANNICUS

Feast after feast

Each night is spread upon the star-lit sky,

But there's no festival in all the world

Served on the million plates of heaven's gold,

Nor single delicacy I would touch

[*Kissing her passionately*]

Without the nectar from these precious lips.

[*MYRRHA tears herself from his embrace*]

My sweet content! my heart of joy!

MYRRHA

For shame,

For shame—!

BRITANNICUS

O foolish, that I have not known

As now I do, the steps to mount Love's throne.

[*With intense passion*]

Who says that you are not my sweetest love?

Show me a spirit that will answer nay.

MYRRHA (*timidly endeavoring to bring BRITANNICUS to his senses*)

True love incorporates the heart with good,

Then crowns the soul with happiness and trust.

BRITANNICUS

You are the fire that burns and glows, a flame

Your scented hair; your heart a rose; your lips

Two petals sweet, for dewy kissings ripe;

Your eyes twin urns in sleep,—to wake at dawn

From yester's dreams to present soft desires.

Who says that you are not my sweetest love?

MYRRHA

Here with what darkness you would clothe that
love!

BRITANNICUS

Not mine those cheeks aglow, your warm-veined
arms,

Those soft white knees adoring oft in prayer?

Those little feet that lightly tread the flowers?

MYRRHA

O Myrrha, save yourself from this abyss!

BRITANNICUS

Ah, eyes half-closed, you must not look from me,

Not all the gods shall turn from me a gaze

Where every droop of lids is amorous.

Here you are mine, and we were born to love!

This chamber echoes with the joy of love.

Where Virtue ruled, now Love must have control.

[*He seizes MYRRHA and draws her passionately to him*]

Come, Myrrha,—kisses here and here, more close
And deeper sown across your eyes and hair,—

MYRRHA

O Christus! in the darkness of this hour
Where is Thy light to guide, Thy way to climb?

BRITANNICUS

Ah, hazard's placed you in a happy sphere,—
This couch of softest silk 'mid leaves of rose,
Made more to sooth delight than court repose.

[*At the mingled looks of pain, anger and disappointment on MYRRHA's face, BRITANNICUS recovers himself almost as suddenly as he had given way to his passion.*]

Beloved do not go—O pardon me!
O blame it on my passion, not my love.
In my true heart I am ashamed—I beg
For pardon on my knees: forget—forgive!

MYRRHA

Ah, but I feared you.

BRITANNICUS

You need fear no more;
Your love is generous—

[*Suddenly heaving a deep sigh*]

MYRRHA

Why do you sigh?
Why are you saddened now so suddenly?

BRITANNICUS (*in low tones, clasping both of MYRRHA's hands*)

I often think, were I to die, dear,
 To sleep, to feel, to pray there in that Realm,
 So far away,
 Some thrill of tender sympathy,
 We had had, or dreamed, or known, or loved,
 We two alone,
 Would startle, then recarry me
 From Exile back to Life again.
 I often think, were I in my grave, dear,
 Beneath the forest deep or vine-clad walls,
 Thine eyes in grief
 Would drop seeds of such sweet sorrow
 That my heart would rise—break into a rose,
 And recognize
 Thy tears of Love upon the petals,
 As the richest jewels from Paradise.

MYRRHA

But never shall I suffer you to die.

BRITANNICUS (*glancing towards NERO*)

Ah, when the heart is torn, one cannot help
 But show what's hidden there of misery.
 I see the jewel flash and know 'tis there,—
 Though we are here in robes arrayed with life
 Within yon gem I see the flame of death;
 Unhappy victim for ambition I.
 Soon I'm incarcerated in a tomb,
 Deprived of love—

MYRRHA

Nay, nay—

BRITANNICUS

That one thing here
On earth approaching most divinity.

MYRRHA

Let us cast off these ornaments, let's leave
These pomps and profanations to their rage.

BRITANNICUS (*picking up a handful of rose leaves*)

These, ashes of my Empire, branch extinct:
Though born to Caesar's throne I own it not;
The eyes of my dear father's shade must weep
To see here robbed his fair posterity.
Yet Myrrha, my beloved, there hath crept
Into my soul some strange and secret strength
That lifts me up—I know not what it is.

MYRRHA (*tenderly*)

Britannicus, brave opener of mine eyes
To love,—

BRITANNICUS

And yet must see foul death each day.
My heritage is lost as well as I;
You have what's left of me—a nothingness.

MYRRHA (*in low tones*)

How are you lost? No, no! His voice you hear
Soothing the ache of centuries away
Into the sweetness of eternal life.

BRITANNICUS

Can it be so? is't true or false?

MYRRHA

Most true.

[NERO now raises his polished emerald, looking
directly across the banqueting room towards

BRITANNICUS; *the other guests anxiously follow the eyes of Caesar.*]

NERO (*loudly*)

Britannicus, it is my wish that you
Would sing for us.

[*A hush falls over the Hall*]

BRITANNICUS

I'm not a balladist
Like Caesar, so I pray to be excused.

NERO (*impatiently*)

We wait, O poet-kin—give us a song.
I might learn much from a comedian.

BRITANNICUS

You flatter me.

NERO

Come then, make ready, sing.

BRITANNICUS (*summoning a harpist to accompany him*)

My present state proceeds from fortune's stings;
My birth I boast of a descent from kings;
Hence may you see from what a noble height
I'm sunk by fortune to this abject plight.
Of father, country and of friends bereft,
Not one of all these sumptuous temples left;
Which, while the fortune of our house did stand,
With rich-wrought ceilings spoke the artist-hand.

[*A murmur of applause, mingling partially with pity and favor*]

[*NERO glares angrily at his brother apparently for this insinuation against his hereditary rights*]

NERO (*to himself*)

The gods avenge contempt, likewise will I.

TITUS

A dangerous song you've sung, my noble friend

And see the look upon your brother's face.

BRITANNICUS (*to NERO*)

My disabilities—

NERO (*controlling his anger*)

You sang—of what?

Insinuations I'll not tolerate.

[*One of the slaves is now seen to approach BRITANNICUS and hand him a myrrhine goblet filled with wine*]

BRITANNICUS (*raising the goblet to his lips*)

This is too hot, when it is cooled, perhaps.

[*The slave drops snow in the cup from a cooler nearby, handing it back to the prince*]

[BRITANNICUS now drinks unsuspectingly. TITUS takes the goblet and is about to drink also when BRITANNICUS suddenly falls forward across the table. With a cry of horror TITUS drops the goblet breaking it to pieces on the tiled floor]

[MYRRHA with one stifled scream throws her arms about her lover; then with the assistance of TITUS, draws him from the table to the couch]

[OCTAVIA is seen rushing to where her brother has fallen]

[Some score of the guests become terror stricken, leaping from their divans and running in all directions. Those, however, more hardened and familiar with the mysteries of the court, stand

rooted in their places with eyes fixed on NERO, awaiting, as it were, some sign of reassurance.]

BRITANNICUS (*regaining consciousness as he rests in MYRRHA'S arms*)

My torch is out!

MYRRHA (*tenderly smoothing his brow*)

Be still, my gracious lord.

BRITANNICUS

Ah, you are here? Fair daylight! O sweet love!
Yet I am doubtful,—I can barely see.

MYRRHA (*as she feels him sinking back again in her arms*)

O love, look—look on me—my darling, speak!

BRITANNICUS (*as his companion kisses him passionately*)

Sweet kisses—fragrant breath! Ah, put your
cheek

Against my cheek. Let Nero take the world,—

Give me your hand—we soon shall meet again.

I see your eyes, like stars they light the trees

Of Heaven. How long to stretch these longing
arms

Alone?

MYRRHA

Take, take my soul in them!

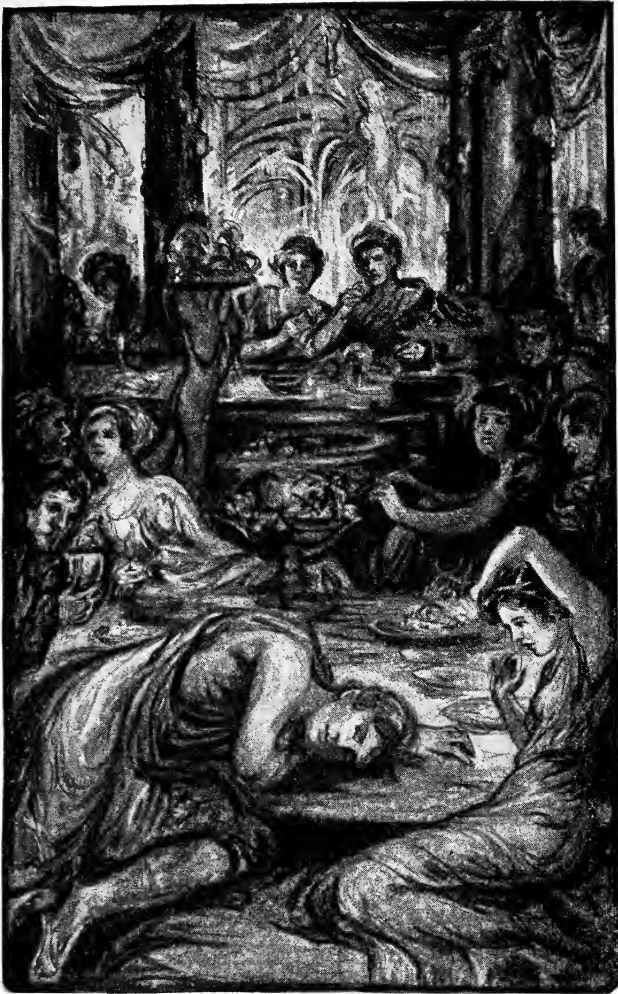
BRITANNICUS (*dreamily*)

O death

Seems other than the dreams; farewell, my wife.

MYRRHA

Your wife in very truth,—he hears me not!



THE DEATH OF BRITANNICUS



O that I had the charms to keep the soul
Within the confines of this feeble case.

BRITANNICUS (*feebly*)

I hear—O—weakness at a time like this?
My solitudes are filled with winged things
And silences are murm'ring into speech.

MYRRHA (*tenderly*)

Lie still upon my heart—close, lest it break.
Now I am wholly yours in thought and hope.

BRITANNICUS (*his eyes closing while he feebly and
half unconsciously moves his hands about MYRRHA'S
face*)

More soft than sleep and singing in my next
World's memories. Now pity lends her tears
To love. Ah, one embrace, O one more kiss
This last time, and no other ever more.
Shall I see there?—O you my love! Farewell
My eyes,—my life, my all—

[Dies]

MYRRHA

O silence hard!

O he is dead! dead, dead! My Prince, my love!

[Kneeling for a moment]

O give me strength to reconcile the words:
"No hair of Myrrha's head shall e'er be harmed,"
When here my very heart is cleft in twain.

[While MYRRHA and OCTAVIA are weeping over the
body of BRITANNICUS, AGRIPPINA sits transfixed;
then her expression gradually changes to one of
alarm and consternation; her hands tremble so

violently that she spills the contents of a cup she had been holding.]

SENECA (*to himself, noticing the countenance of AGRIPPINA*)

Ah! she is innocent of this, at least.

So nature drops us down. Poor witless wretch!

How many deaths ahead before mine own?

Tell me, sweet oracle, be kind--reveal.

LUCAN

O what a little nothingness is man!

His best lot is to know the way to die,

The next best is to be compelled to die.

[At a sign from NERO, slaves come to bear the body of BRITANNICUS to an ante-room.]

TITUS (*looking down into the face of his dead friend*)

So beautiful in death the lad appears;

There lies the last of Rome's most noble house,

An ancestry of seven centuries

Is flitting now to unsubstantial dust.

[Glaring at NERO]

O monstrous deed! O foulest fratricide!

[Exeunt OCTAVIA, MYRRHA, TITUS, SENECA and others, with the slaves bearing the body]

[NERO rises and attempts by reassuring smiles and gestures to quell the growing panic among the guests]

NERO

I bid you stay, my friends, and not desert

The feast. My brother hath from childhood been

The subject of such fits. He may return,

For wine is sovereign cure for all one's ills,—
 Come dancers all! refill your cups, come drink!
 [*The guests hesitate for a moment, but gradually file
 out of the Hall; even TIGELLINUS and BURRUS are
 seen to slip away.*]

[NERO and AGRIPPINA confront each other alone]

AGRIPPINA (*fiercely*)

This is your work.

NERO

Seek not to grieve a work

Which is your own.

AGRIPPINA

How now! what masque is this?

NERO

I have out-traveled you. *We two* still rule,
 Though, madam, pardon me if I infringe.

AGRIPPINA

I'll show you for a monster, yet I fear—

NERO

Suspicious ever is an evil mind;
 Now let the dead be dead. You live and I;
 But do not tattle too much of your ills.
 That's all.

AGRIPPINA

I live here and am mistress, sir.

NERO

I never feared the face that first I saw.
 Let me be sure—a little nearer—so—
 The very first I saw, the very face.

AGRIPPINA

Dare touch my hand?

NERO

A Caesar's courtesy.

AGRIPPINA

Would I could tear out those blood-shotten eyes
And feed them to the beasts!

NERO

Ungentle queen,
Heredity bears partners for its crimes.

AGRIPPINA

You challenge me with your comparisons?

NERO

That fault lies in my birth—an act supreme
Of yours which Fate most wisely swayed to Rome.
Behold! so far you've had your will; now, I
Would be more than a tame interpreter
Of Rome's great pride and all that she would
boast
Of pomp and power unassailable.
By all the gods! do not my deeds declare
And re-assert your bloody majesty?

CURTAIN

ACT V



ACT V

TIME—Four years later.

PLACE—Baiae

Evening.

SCENE I :

An ante-chamber in the Imperial Villa. Through a large door to the right is seen the outer hall lined with lofty marble pillars.

[Enter hall, two Romans meeting each other]

1ST ROMAN

What haste, good fellow, whither now so fast?

2ND ROMAN

I saw't, but turned away mine eyes and ears.

1ST ROMAN

I'll hear with faithful ears, whate'er it be.

2ND ROMAN

Mark! Nero's name shall burn the sky of Hell:
The guilt of greater evils takes the shame
From lesser. O the wrath of highest gods!

[Exit 2nd Roman]

1ST ROMAN

He is too earnest. Faith, I'll follow him.

[Exit 1st Roman]

[Enter slowly MYRRHA. She walks about adjusting several minor ornaments in the room; then sits on a couch]

[She pushes back her long dark hair from her temples, at the same time choking back a sob]

MYRRHA

Do I still live? Can I still bear to live?
 Or am I mad? This craft of reason lost
 In grief's unfathomed flood? Alas! Alas!
 I find no harbor nigh. Naught can I see
 But woes that murder joy! In whom confide?
 Is kindness not the natural due of life?
 Dear Christ, dost Thou not wish the world to
 save?
 But tears are vain. Each day brings forth some
 new
 Calamity; more ghastly crimes each night.
 The glory of sagacious minds is fled,—
 Forever lost. Mad fiends of all degrees,
 Without constraint proclaim there is nor God,
 Nor faith, nor love:—all trod into the dust
 By whomsoever bear authority.
 Now only murder sates the Emperor's heart,
 And thinner grows his train of flatterers.
 My father dead, my lover foully slain—
 No hope for me who once had hope to love!
 The saddest strokes of life have struck me dumb.
 Britannicus, O loss beyond my tears!—
 Thy precious memory shall never die,
 Though grief may die slain by excessive grief;
 Then I shall go, attired in bridal robes,

And Death shall lead me gently by the hand,
To meet my lover in eternity.

[*Pausing and drying her tears*]

Within this dreadful Court I had one friend,
Octavia, and she an exile weeps
Her dreary days at Pandataria,
A Christian comforted in banishment
By Christus' teachings of Eternal Life.

My Christian brethren, though their eyes weep out
From suffering, keep joyous hearts that beat
With strength of Faith and its encouragements.

[*Drawing a parchment from her bosom and reading aloud*]

This message here from Paulus gives me strength.

"And who is he that will harm you, if ye be zealous of that which is good? But if ye suffer for the sake of righteousness, blessed are ye: and fear not their fear, neither be troubled; but sanctify in your hearts Christ as Lord.

"For it is better, if the will of God be so, that ye suffer for well-doing rather than for evil-doing; because Christ also suffered for sins once, the righteous for the unrighteous, that He might bring us to God."

[*Enter TITUS excitedly*]

TITUS (*recognizing MYRRHA*)

The lady Myrrha! Ah, do I intrude?

Is Nero here? Gods, what a scene to mar

The lovely night!

MYRRHA (*anxiously*)

Ah where? what news, my lord?

TITUS

Tonight who may look up without a fear?

MYRRHA

Misfortunes conquer often every fear.

TITUS (*as if seized with a sudden suggestion*)

If you will unto Agrippina haste—

[MYRRHA *looks startled*]

Indeed I know it is a sacrifice;

She's in distress and may have need of you.

MYRRHA

The most exalted are bow'd down by woe;

O sobs and miseries are all I hear.

I'll go to her; I am decided, sir.

[*Exit MYRRHA*]

TITUS (*to himself, admiring MYRRHA as she retires through the hall*)

She is the noblest woman in the Court;

No wanton kiss, no false, no flatt'ring smile,

Yet she has every winning charm. Sweet girl,

This Christ—there must be good in Him withal.

'Tis rare example here, I wish it well.

List and construe my words, Posterity!

Afar I see Jerusalem in flames

While I o'erthrow her proudest monuments

In penalty of what was merited.

And exiled be the Jew throughout the world

And Christus well avenged by Roman arms.

[*Loud voices heard approaching*]

[*Enter NERO, SENECA, TIGELLINUS, BURRUS and ANICETUS*]

[TITUS *slips unnoticed by them and stands listening just outside the door*]

NERO (*pacing wildly about the room*)

O cursed crones, O maudlin murderers!
This is an hour of vile malignity.
My mother drowned, a ship unnailed to sink
Midway to yonder angry, rocky coast.
And who conceived this deed? Not I, no, no!
You Anicetus, are responsible.
My mother dead! her mem'ry will not die!
The womb that bore me, in the waters, cold,—
Those eyes that looked upon me first, now closed
With slimy ooze; while writhing eels devour
The breasts that gave me love and nourishment.

TIGELLINUS

My lord—

NERO

Would you console me, Tiger-soul?
A fitting heart for sympathy have you!
That which I see, I see—my mother's face!
If evil come of this outrageous deed—

TIGELLINUS

Be calm, my master, you are now secure.

NERO

She stands, she sighs and sways in whispers vast—
O this! her hand, her hand, it touches me!

TIGELLINUS

Behind the throne which she would soon have
seized.

NERO

The sharks are making towards me, side long
 shapes
 And would bite guilt out of my secret soul.
 See, see, my mother's in a body yet.
 O you now being dead, so loved your son!
 Why hinder me, you brutes, rash fools! stand
 back!

ANICETUS

We have done simply what you bade us do.

SENECA

Its consummation then you should endure.

NERO

I'll not believe it. Now she calls my name.
 It was the first voice on this earth I heard.
 Farewell, my mother—think me not so base—

TITUS (*rushing back into the room*)

But Agrippina lives!

BURRUS

What do you mean?

TITUS

Upon the moonlit sea, I witnessed it
 A-sailing there with old Caractacus.

NERO (*wildly addressing TIGELLINUS and ANICETUS*)

O, O, O, O! I'm not a matricide.

Destroy that mandate, tear that mandate up!

TIGELLINUS (*looking at TITUS*)

Now we must take him in our confidence.

Speak, if your words are true.

TITUS

Sir, Prefect, peace!

For justice is performed in spite of you.
At bloody deeds you always stand unmoved,
Your present disappointment bares your soul.

NERO

I am not doomed—no, now I am not doomed.
I dreamed she lived—I had forgotten that.

[To TITUS]

What if you lie? What then—if this were false?

TIGELLINUS

Give us your proofs.

TITUS

List first to what I saw.

A shrill despairing cry broke through the night,
Then all grew still beneath a dimness kissed
By splendid stars of pearl and emerald.
With winged sails we bounded o'er the sea
To where that voice had risen in the gloom.
Our smooth shaped boat tossed up a sparkling
spray,
The waves in hollow pathways following;
But when we there arrived it was too late.
The wounded vessel sank beneath the waves,
Two pressing tides met just above her decks,—
Then calmer than before, the waters ebbed,
Weaving those thin and unembodied shapes
Which Fancy sends with silver from the moon.
Half in a waking dream we scanned the deep;
For lack of light and sound impatient grew,
Unsatisfied, a cold chill in our limbs.
Then lo! two jewelled arms 'mid ripples rose
As if from out the foam of fairyland.

More closely drawn, behold a woman swam,
 In frenzy sought to reach the distant strand.
 More swift we sailed across the silent sea,—
 We followed straight the course of those gemmed
 arms,—

How noble seemed that shadow plunging on!
 A presence struggling in the lights and darks
 And dim environments of varied hue.
 Still plunging on—we but a length away—
 But ere we reached the trailing of her hair
 She rose and stood erect upon the shore.
 She quickly turned in frightened steps from us
 Scarce knowing her deliverance had come.
 Against the cliff in weariness she leaned
 An outline delicate, benumbed with cold.
 The crescent moon rays fell upon her face
 And dripping hair thick to the girdle-tie.
 A loveliness in marble; yet withal,
 Her blue eyes bore much sadness in their gaze.
 And then we recognized, we named her name:—
 Now in her villa safe, Augusta rests.

BURRUS

Then peace, your mother lives.

TIGELLINUS

Do not rejoice.

NERO

And pray why not? The seas have stood aloof
 To take a prize so marvelous as she.

TIGELLINUS

Do you not know she will avenge this act,
 Proclaim it to the corners of the realm?

NERO

You tell me that?

TIGELLINUS

For I would have you choose—

NERO

I'll sue to her for life—I am her son.

TIGELLINUS

Will you forget her threats so quickly, Sire?

TITUS

A mother sees her child's most inmost soul.

TIGELLINUS

Ambition soars above her motherhood,
By slow degrees she'll gain the arms of all
Then gild her savage nature with revenge.

TITUS

No; when ambition grows from mother-love
Forever it will stand in loyalty.

TIGELLINUS

Will you be hoodwinked by this fiery youth
Or trust your safety to your ministers?

TITUS

Your mother—

TIGELLINUS

Shall I put him out the door?

TITUS

I would not Prefect, play a game with you
For fear you'd cozen me with trickery.

[To NERO]

No matter how the elements of man
Are clothed with power, the authentic rules
Of Nature are the same. For gifts and gold

The hungry men of Rome will flatter you ;
 Through fear these few will honor you, profess
 Their love to sate their own ambitious ends ;
 But as your wit is noble, you well know
 Your mother only loves you for yourself.
 If that love is ambitious, it is well :
 She seeks not what she seeks for her own self
 But only questing glory for her son.
 Such is the horoscope of mother's love
 Mixed in the waywardness of sacrifice.

TIGELLINUS

If you see visions, pass them to the air.

NERO (*turning to SENECA*)

Let me be rid of this perplexity.

Come, Seneca, please—what may you suggest?

[*There is a long and intolerable silence between the men. SENECA turns his troubled eyes to BURRUS. The latter seems to understand the look of inquiry and what is going on in the philosopher's mind, but turns bluntly away. From SENECA's expression there appears to be a mixture, first of scruple, then of fear, that by making the concession now, AGRIPPINA might become dangerous afterwards.*]

SENECA (*to NERO in tones of sullen brevity*)

You first are Emperor and then, her son ;

Let Anicetus finish what's begun.

BURRUS

He knocked at virtue's gate, but entered not !

TITUS (*glaring at SENECA*)

O thou philosopher, thou stoic false !

Disclaimer of so many soaring truths,

To what hast thou now fallen? Thou, of all
Men whom I honored, far above the vile
And vulgar standard of this age, to stain
Thy hands in this most heinous matricide.
Thy words have now forever blotted out
The good in thy philosophy. Thou fool!

[*Enter messenger*]

MESSENGER (*to NERO*)

Augusta prays that Caesar come to her.

CURTAIN

SCENE II

The same night.

PLACE—Baiae

SCENE 2:

An apartment in the villa of Agrippina on the shore of the Lucrine Lake. A large doorway on the right at back commands a view of a graduating terrace full of shrubbery, roses, pomegranates and an abundance of flowers, while statuary and plashing fountains cast shadows of the moon across the garden. In the distance lies the Lake. To the left in the room and set forward is a large divan enclosed on three sides and hung with handsome tapestries.

Nearby there are a lamp and the accessories of a Roman lady's toilet.

As the curtain rises Agrippina is seen clad in white, reclining at full length on the couch. She appears intensely nervous and her maid is endeavoring to soothe her and make her rest easily.

AGRIPPINA (*half rising*)

Enanthe, has the messenger returned?

The night wanes, while I long to see my son.

ENANTHE

Not yet, Augusta.

AGRIPPINA

He should render thanks

To Jove that I am from that shipwreck safe.

ENANTHE

Augusta, try to sleep.

AGRIPPINA

No, no, not now.

[*Sadly*]

You have not yet lived long enough to know

The ardent nature of a mother's love.

A potent love—yet, such a helpless love!

When children suffer, mothers suffer more.

[*Rising and sitting on the edge of the couch*]

Forget I cannot. What could cause that wreck?

The sea was calm—

ENANTHE

Yea, lady Empress, calm.

AGRIPPINA

If I remember, in the outer dark

A ripple hardly on the silvery waves
And regular their murmurs on the shore.

ENANTHE

Most strange, Augusta, yet the sea has moods,—

AGRIPPINA

Has not the night a more than common calm?
The very elements seem not in league—
A dimness and no more—a placid sea.

ENANTHE

For this, he will be thankful,—you are safe.

AGRIPPINA (*nervously*)

Will he be kind? O when will he be here?
See mother-love lives like a beggar's joy;
On lesser lives—it waits without reward.
My wrongs! I could make all the senate weep
At my offended dignity. O child
Have I o'er-stepped the bounds of loving? Child,
Am I not mother of a Caesar still?
My joys, my only joys are centered there.
Ambition with late sorrow for its sins,
Hunts me too hard. He calls me "mother", still.

[*Smiling*]

His eyes were filled with tears the other night,
As if some anguish held his heart in pain
When he so urged me go to Antium:
I answered I was not in health to go;—

[*Abruptly*]

Enanthe, has the messenger returned?

ENANTHE

From yonder terrace I will watch his way.

[*Exit ENANTHE*]

AGRIPPINA (*to herself*)

I wonder if it was an accident.
 The galleys lay around and idly rolled
 Upon the waves where I was fain to die.
 Most sure, the wrong was not in Neptune's will:
 His pity 'twas that saved me from the wave.
 What's yet unplayed by Nero's wickedness?
 Which of us two sinned most? Ah, poignant
 thought!

By former evils, easily we err;
 If so, then fits this murderous policy.
 To die by Nero—my Imperial son,—
 To die by my own son—no, Nero, no!
 It was the sea, the smooth sea treacherous.
 Yet be there fickle winds in crime, that care
 Naught for the strongest bonds. No cause, no
 cause,—

What mad events find fav'ring periods
 In this apparent seemliness of life!

[*Starting up*]

Why now come back the augur's words of bane:
 "Thy son shall reign but kill his mother." ah!
 Not he I've dewed with tears in his small crib
 And nursed and tended in his baby ills!
 A lying fiend was that astrologer!
 Besides, I will not die! But is this I?
 I feel so lonely. Mem'ry will not fail,
 But with Ambition's eyes, in darkest night
 Sees like the owl. Above, the Furies' locks
 Drip fire into the niches of the past.
 Give answer, Honor, Power, your summons set

Against my conscience. O remorseful mind
By death alone art thou out-paramoured!
Time is cast down. The sun turns upward, so!

[*Pause*]

Clear up thy sorrows, conscience, so increased
By this outrageous Fate; aye! Fate's the word!—
Ere fraud and vice were fashions, Fate was here
And trampled shouting, on life's sacraments,
In scorn and hate of all their weaknesses.
I am Fate's paramour—a ruined life
Near strangled by a son Fate bade me bear,—
Fate slew my husband that this child might reign:
And my hand made to slay him, pitiless!
'Tis done, 'tis done. Foul deed, and foul Remorse!
A fault confessed is barely fault at all.
One cannot change what was decreed and writ
Far back in star-dust. That which passeth must
Have come to pass. See now, I shrink no more.
Why halt or waver at Fate's hissing snakes?
Look at these hands! blood-guilty, I confess,
Yet, if I'm guilty, I'm betrayed by Fate.
But O not death, that was not in my Fate.

[*Pause*]

Death, is it thou whom bravest souls revere
With fearsome awe? Art thou that storm on
Time's
Foam-fretted shore that launches human souls
On Charon's bank? Art thou that tempest wild
O'erturning Life; that blows forthwith a wind
In thunder crash to shake Creations's frame
To its primeval atoms? Aye, to die—

To cease to be; the wilting, falling off
 Of finest wits:—to die—the fear to be
 What we were ne'er before; a counting house
 Which keeps the keys itself; where all the past
 Is lost, yet being past was lost before
 We breathed? Birth is the countercheck for
 Death—

The folly of it! how Death's boldness grows:
 Our fearing of it troubles all the rests
 Of life in these our fleshly prisons. O—

[Uttering a sob AGRIPPINA throws herself on the couch. A great gust of wind blows out several of the candles. Suddenly at the foot of the divan appears a veiled figure.]

Who comes here? What is this illusion?
 What do I see? is this a dream outdreamt?
 What horrid journey takest thou, my soul?

GHOST

Unmerciful Augusta, basely false!

AGRIPPINA

My husband's voice! Does Claudius still live?

GHOST

Who die are drenched in Hell—

AGRIPPINA (*striking her head with her clenched fist*)

Once noble mind!

Is this thy record with a backward look?
 Is my poor spirit torn with whips and snakes?
 Or are its thoughts mis-dreaming into shapes
 That now give birth to yonder flitting ghost?

GHOST

To mix with devils who torment the soul
While foul Eternity doth split on Time—

AGRIPPINA

To stop infection—O may I awake!

GHOST

Untimely came my hurt—

AGRIPPINA

Away, away,
You spiteful villain, hence, and quit my sight!
The dead are lying as the living lie.
Does no one hear me?

GHOST

No one hear thee? Yes,
Dead Claudius hears.

AGRIPPINA

Again! begone, begone!
This very night upon the calmest sea,
I nearly paid for my offense to you:
So now you stand there like some lighthouse tall
To shine on billows of insanity.

GHOST

'Tis frightful, sleeping in a serpent's bed,
With blood we bathe ourselves steeped in hot pits
Of clay. Be ready, for thou soon shalt see
Thy robes in tatters torn from writhing limbs,
Where fire shall be thy pillows laid in slime.

AGRIPPINA

Would you reverse the inner face of life
By some relentless justice? Ghost, there's none
In Hell that can make me regret what deeds

I have committed, or can prove to me
 My deeds were evil. So, some shadow now
 Is holding festival in flesh and blood.
 Does life snuff out then shackled death gush in
 And jealous grow in hell at them that live?
 No nearer to me! go, I'm going mad!

GHOST

Life's but a trifle here—

AGRIPPINA

Go, go, go, go!

[With a shriek she picks up the lamp and hurls it in the corner toward the phantom, then falls to the floor, her hair becoming dishevelled as she leans limply against the side of the couch]

[The figure of a woman is seen suddenly coming through the garden. She pauses at the entrance and knocks gently on the panel]

[Enter MYRRHA]

[The girl looks about the room startled; seeing AGRIPPINA she runs quickly across the room, gazing down upon her compassionately]

MYRRHA

The struggle, anguish of the mind unblest.

[Touching AGRIPPINA gently on the shoulder]

With Faith! dear Agrippina,—

[AGRIPPINA moves and looks up with dazed eyes]

AGRIPPINA

Are you flesh

And blood? O child, would you upbraid me too?

MYRRHA

I'm Myrrha, Lady, like you lone and sad.

AGRIPPINA

Sweet voice, dear Myrrha; yes, I know you now.
But why, why have you come to me? I am
A wicked woman, sorrowful, bereaved.

MYRRHA

Therefore, I came in this extremity;
Life's riches are not of sufficient worth;
All earthly things shall pass—

AGRIPPINA

How good you are.

MYRRHA

Nay, there's the Triumph! Comfort Christ doth
give
In all our woes, none ever yet of Him
Asked sympathy in vain.

AGRIPPINA

What do you mean?
Are you a Christian? of a sect despised,—
A foolish superstition—say not so!

MYRRHA

In serving Christ, then best I serve the world:
All that we own, His gifts of love—

AGRIPPINA

Ah, dear?

MYRRHA

Who strings the nerves, who reds the blood?
Who lights
The eyes and works the brain?

AGRIPPINA

We end in clay

Then conjure up new vice from ashes dead,
Breed like the rats and filthy toads of night.

MYRRHA

He promises a life that never ends:—

AGRIPPINA (*sarcastically*)

I keep then my artistic conscience;
Reset the wrong and silly balances
Of soul in some good devils' shadowland?
By Hades! I cannot imagine it.
'Tis madness.

MYRRHA

Nay, not so.

AGRIPPINA

Deceitful words—

Why do I stand debating, wasting breath?
Death is the surest of our attributes,
No wild uncertainty in holding that!
And if 'twere not? Long, long have these poor
eyes
Been dimmed by disappointments; so, my child,
When they are closed, let no more tears be shed
By waking in some vague Eternity.
Grief's in ourselves 'tis we ourselves who grieve;
Set free by death, secure then from all grief.
Being rid of sorrow, I'll yield happiness
For painless dust beneath the passer's foot.
Extinction be my bliss! Come, when thou wilt!
Come, whether good or ill, thou'lt serve me well.
Have I not paid the price of earthly joys?
With that receipt, would you have me pay more

And be the sport of spirits after life?

[*Pause*]

I know you Myrrha, to be virtuous;
Christ's teachings their attractions have, I grant,
For you and others, but for my poor self
I much prefer to die than wing the air
To unknown climes of more calamity.

MYRRHA

"Help Thou her unbelief."

AGRIPPINA

If it be so,
What comfort in this great decay of life
May come, I'll chance what I have merited.
[*ENANTHE rushes suddenly into the room*]

ENANTHE

The guards! A file is coming through the gate.

AGRIPPINA

At last 'tis Nero, and he comes to me.

ENANTHE

Behold, a storm is sweeping o'er the lake!

[*AGRIPPINA hastily adjusts her dress and hair, while
MYRRHA and ENANTHE run about the room putting things in order*]

[*Enter ANICETUS. He salutes AGRIPPINA*]

ANICETUS

The Emperor inquires about thy health?

AGRIPPINA (*looking towards the entrance expectantly*)

Is he not here? Why do you come instead?

[*Becoming angry*]

You are no friend to come as messenger;

'Tis not long since I made you public jest.

[ANICETUS *places his hand threateningly upon his scabbard*]

Ah, why your hand upon a sword—and why
This file of soldiers? Answer me, at once!

ANICETUS (*roughly*)

Use not harsh tones to question now. I'm not
In humour for more ridicule.

AGRIPPINA (*white with rage*)

So, so,

O fall some vengeance down! Ditch-dog! do you
Not know to whom you speak? Come you—

ANICETUS (*to his men*)

Put up

Your swords lest fair Augusta swoon.

AGRIPPINA

For this

You'll taste of Caesar's wrath—now go.

[*At a sign from ANICETUS to his men, MYRRHA and ENANTHE are suddenly seized and carried roughly from the room. Simultaneously a gust of wind from the pending storm blows in putting out all the lights save one feeble taper burning near the divan.*]

ANICETUS

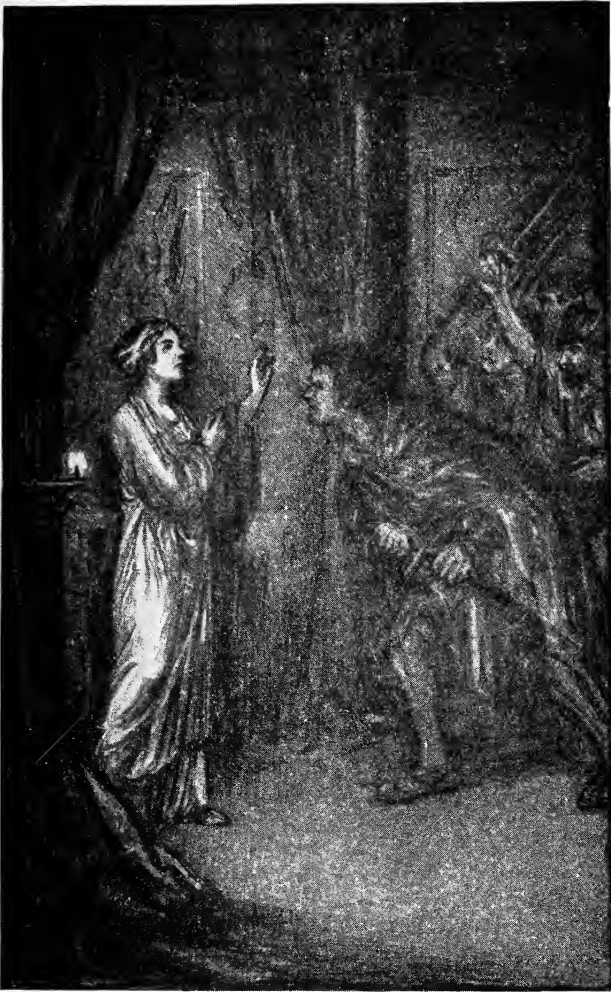
His Grace

Is meditating higher things than thy
White tresses, Lady Agrippina.

AGRIPPINA

Stand

Away from me; and take your guards away.



“Ah, why your hand upon a sword—and why
This file of soldiers? Answer me, at once!”

Act V. Scene 2.

ANICETUS

Do not deceive thy thoughts, we bring no love:
 We're not excused, in that we take too long
 To finish that which brought on so much wrong.
 Why is thy son not here, dost thou know that?

[*Holding his closed fist in her face*]

Behold thy Nero's signet ring,—for thee!

AGRIPPINA

Me, me, his mother? True astrologer!
 Prepare some incense for offended Heaven!
 What was the cause? my son, my darling boy,
 Have you so terrible an end sought out?
 Is this the thanks you give your mother, son?

[*Beating her breasts*]

So kill, kill, kill,—no, no, no, no, not there!

[*The taper suddenly blows out leaving the stage in darkness. A flash of lightning is followed by a peal of thunder*]

Strike here, here, here, my womb that monster
 bore!

[*For a few moments the thunder and lightning continue. Murmurs of the departing soldiers are heard in the distance followed by a far off trumpet call. Suddenly MYRRHA is discovered standing in the entrance holding in her hand a lamp. She looks about and listens uneasily, then moves rapidly into the room, halts in a state of fear, then recovering her self-possession looks downward towards the body of AGRIPPINA which is lying outstretched on the floor.*]

MYRRHA (*flashing up the lamp*)

O un replenished lamp give me more light!
The walls spin 'round, the air is flecked with
blood!

That I imagined—no, it cannot be!

[*Kneeling*]

O horrible! O helpless, mangled corpse!
O cruel, cruel! see the veins still warm
Nor chilled by death. Upon her countenance
That proud look marks her as an empress still,
To rule some self-enshrined eternity
Above ingratitude's most brutal stroke.

[*Enter PAULUS and two Christians, cautiously looking about them and towards the entrance. They pause, when they see MYRRHA, and speak in whispers for a moment. PAULUS leaves the group and addresses MYRRHA.*]

PAULUS

Peace be with thee, my daughter, this sad hour;
Lift up thy heart to heav'n whence cometh help.

MYRRHA (*languidly looking up, then eagerly kneeling at his feet*)

O bless me Father, for my heart is torn
And I am weak before this blast of death!

PAULUS

Still lives the MASTER who can help and save;
Yet, tears will give relief;—let grief have sway
But not the grief of them that have not hope.
A little while still mourn thy mistress dead,
Then, let us lead thee to some christian home.

[*He blesses her and retires to his companions.*]

MYRRHA *rising, turns to the corpse and speaks, kneeling]*

MYRRHA

Poor mother! loving more than loved by son
Whose baleful shadow darkens Rome's fair dawn:
Stripped of thy mortal strength where now the
soul

That mocked at all beyond the grave-worms' wit?
O Power! where is your sovereign process now,
Whose strength would bend the heav'n's diameter?
Ambition's brightest splendor laid in dust!

[Tenderly]

And yet—in Agrippina much of good
There was between the alternating shafts
Of primal wickedness; her Empire most
Rose from the granite base of mother-love;
In that were mixed such strange disquietudes,
Ambition cruel, terrible and stern:
Withal she was a mother, faithful, true;
Yes, virtue's sacred air an echo owned
In Agrippina's heart a note of peace
Amid the baser discords of the Court.
Rest here the blame of her unprosperous deeds
Beneath the mantle of maternal love:

[MYRRHA spreads a veil over the face of the corpse, then rises; PAULUS approaches and takes her left hand, gently]

PAULUS

Come child: (MYRRHA *stands, still looking at the body*) the hour is late, let grief have end.

Our enemies and hers may find us else;

We must not rashly tempt their pagan rage.
Come, Myrrha, daughter!

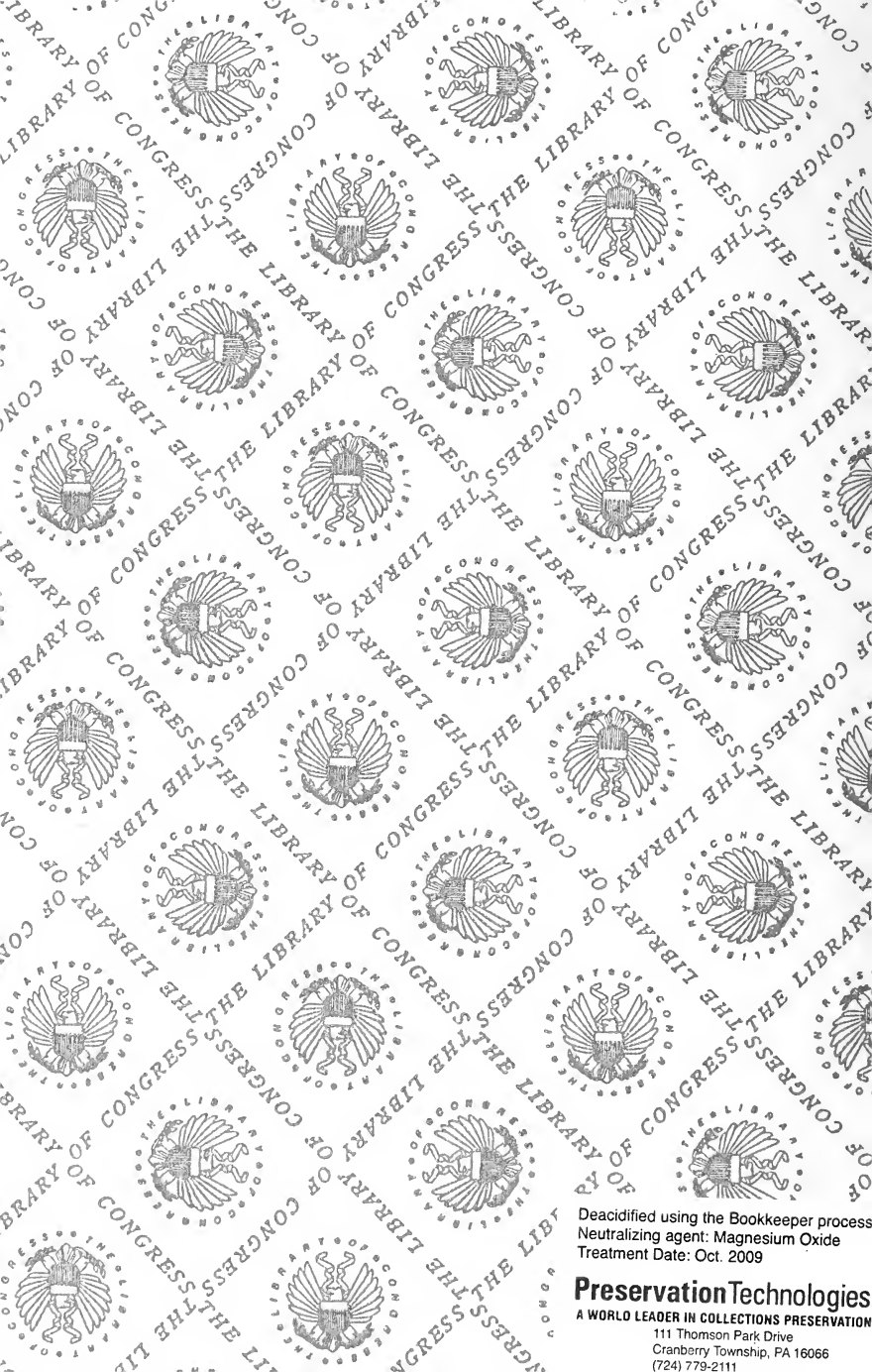
MYRRHA (*lifting her right hand in supplication toward
heaven, over the corpse*)

Yes, I leave her here,
And unto Christ's dear mercy trust her soul.
Let Him of her life's record scan the scroll.

CURTAIN

FINIS



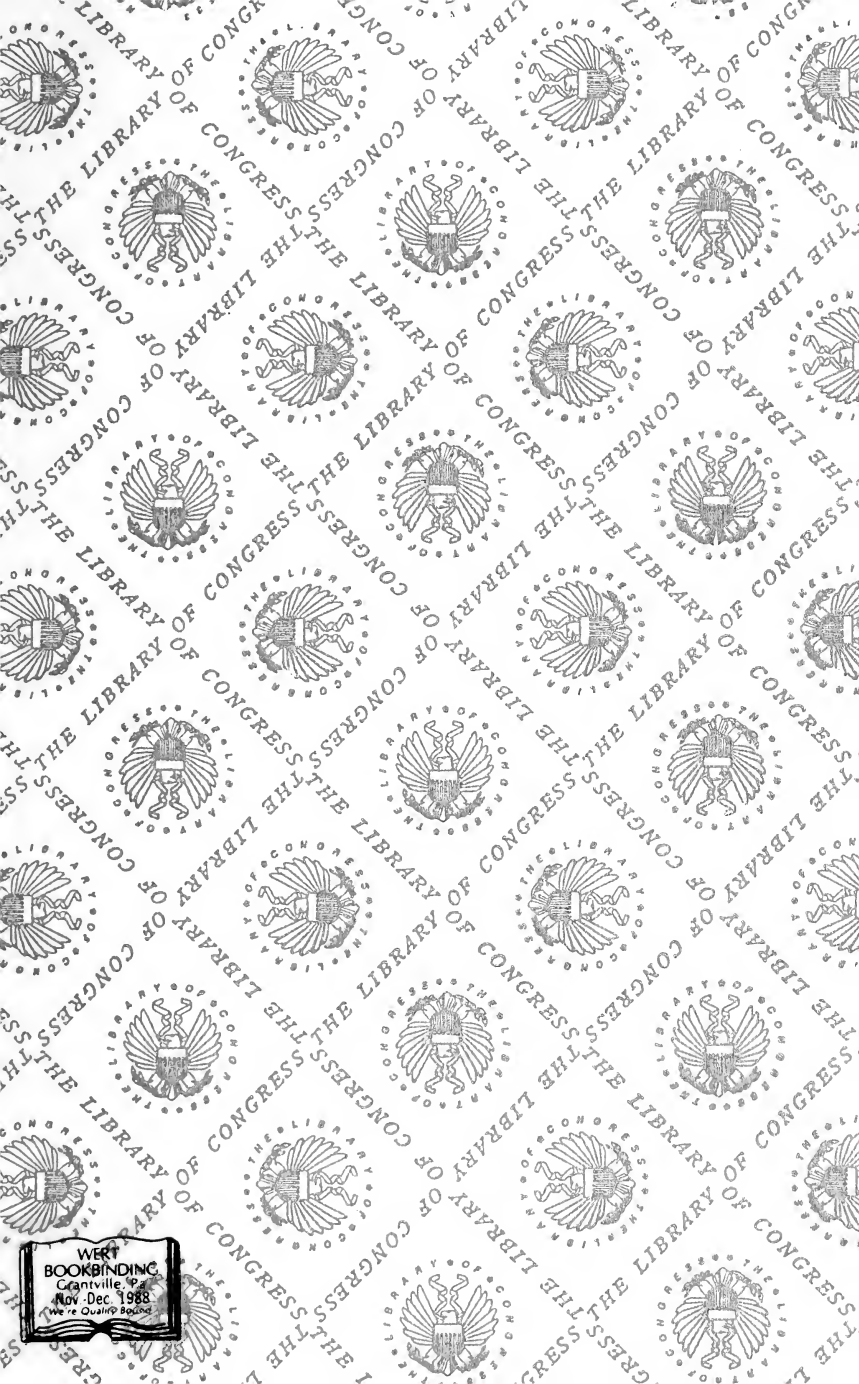


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